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COMBAT OF SHADOWS

MANOHAR MALGONKAR

'Desire and Aversion are opposite shadows.
Those who allow themselves to be overcome
by their struggle cannot rise to a knowledge
of reality'.

—Verse 27 from *The Path of Knowledge*,
the *Bhagavad Gita*



ORIENT PAPERBACKS

*For Faly Petit
As from a stikari to a hunter*

**The action of this story takes place
in North-Western Assam, India**

**The time: September 1938 to March
1940**

Combat of Shadows

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PART I
PRELUDE TO HOME LEAVE

A Sack of Tea Leaf

SHORGUN under one arm, retriever at his heels, two plump chukor partridges dangling from his game belt, Henry Winton began the steep climb up the bridle path, pleasantly tired, hungry for breakfast ready for his day, ready for anything. There was nothing like an hour's brisk walk before sunrise to set you up for the day, the long day of the tea plant.

You were never really away from your job since you lived on the plantation itself, the man on the spot, surrounded by a thousand odd labourers, a hundred or so clerks and supervisors and chap-rassies, innumerable wives and children, their troubles were your troubles, their problems your problems day or night.

You lived amongst them, and yet apart from them and above them, thank God, up there in the gleaming pink and white manager's bungalow, at the raw edge of the valley, screened off from the noise and the squalor and the sweating world of labour by a thick belt of chir and kul pines. You lived all alone with yourself, unless you took the dog into account. That was the great drawback, drawback, and at the same time also the ultimate saving grace, of a planter's life—solitude.

The company would not have taken you on in the first place if you had been married. You were not supposed to think of marriage before you had been broken in and made permanent, normally well after your first home leave. You were about thirty years old by that time, and too set in your ways and too jealous of your freedom to think of marriage lightly. If you came back from your second home leave without a wife, you were not likely to get married ever. The company seemed to bank on that, almost, the majority of its planters were middle-aged bachelors.

Not for a moment in all his service, almost five years of it now, had Henry Winton wondered if it had been worth while. He was unshakably convinced that this was his way of life, a man's way in a decadent, motor-car and radio civilization. You ran an enormous

estate complete with a factory all on your own, sixteen hundred acres of God's own outdoors in the farthest reaches of the Assam highlands planted with the best-yielding tea bushes in India; you controlled a corps of labourers; you created something, even if it was only tea, but at that it was the best tea of its kind in the world. He, Henry Winton, had chosen this life, and he was making a success of it; and as he went striding up the hill, his spirits in tune with the gorgeous, rain-washed, late September morning, he would not have given it up for anything else in the world.

Winding through the dark, matted jungle, the bridle-path went up and up, a narrow, private pathway leading to the manager's bungalow, discreetly by-passing the coolie lines, and the fermenting room, and the drying shed smelling faintly of tea, and the grey bulk of the factory itself and its outcrops, the staff quarters and the offices; plunging out of the virgin forest into a corner of the open, terraced garden with its row upon row of prim tea bushes each cropped level as a billiard table; then through the belt of silver oaks and blue pines past the absurd, toy-like private mountain peak called Wallach's Folly to the enchanted seclusion of the bungalow perched on the edge of the cliff like a story-book castle; leading up to wealth and comfort and the bustle of trained servants waiting for their sahib's return, eager to do his bidding; to new laid eggs and bacon and toast and English marmalade . . .

There was a rustle and a whoosh right under his feet, cutting through his thoughts like a knife, and a kalij pheasant went rocketing into the valley. Even as he brought the gun to his shoulder in one smooth, polished movement, as he swung it with the flight of the bird, assessing the correct lead, both eyes wide open, Henry felt that there was something amiss. But it was only after he had pressed the trigger that he became aware of a movement away in the bushes, a fleeting red shadow in the dark jungle directly in his line of fire.

The kalij flew on unhurt, but as the shot rang out, there was a frightened shriek.

'Christ! Who's that?' and Henry ran forward, calling out in Hindi: 'Who's that? Are you hurt? Speak!'

The horrible thought of a human-being dead or maimed, the sudden plunge into fear, the unbearable pounding of his heart, the cold sweat . . . oh, God!

'Christ! Speak up—who's that?'

It was a woman in an orange-coloured sari, and she was lying doubled up, her forehead touching the ground, hands folded before her, calling out hysterically, 'Ayo yo yo! don't shoot, sahib, please don't kill me Oh, God, spare me, please— ayo yo yo!' She was obviously no coolie woman from the way she was dressed, and she had called out in English, 'Please don't kill me' The one thing of which Henry could be sure was that she was unhurt

'Damn!' he shouted in a sudden release from tension, and ran up to where she was lying Oh, damn! Stop yelling! No one is going to kill you What the hell and then he saw the sack lying beside her. He knew it held tea leaf

For several weeks past, Henry had suspected that tea leaf from the lower garden was being stolen regularly, but his chowkidar had assured him that there was absolutely no pilfering and his chief stockman, a man called Jugal Kishore, had registered astonishment that any loss of leaf should have been even suspected Now he had proof

What's this? Henry roared 'God damn you!' He kicked viciously at the sack in a blind rage again and again until the sewing burst open and a stream of limp dark green tea leaf poured out. He bent down and picked up a handful

All of a sudden the woman got up ran down the hillside, and disappeared in the thick jungle and Henry cursed aloud with rage 'The bitch' the damned thieving bitch! Go get her, Herman— get her!

Herman the Labrador bull chested and shining, trained to follow the scent of game and to go for anyone to order went crashing down the khud, nose to the ground tail swishing wildly, making a great deal of noise but not barking, and Henry dashed after him, stumbling in the thick undergrowth and cursing He had gone hardly a hundred yards before he heard the dog barking, and knew that he had caught up with the woman Within a couple of minutes, he came up to them She had climbed in a tree and the dog was keeping guard below dashing repeatedly at the tree trunk

Panting, Henry Winton looked up at the cowering woman perched astride the first fork of the tree, barely ten feet from the ground, gripping a branch with her legs. She was little more than a girl, perhaps twenty years old Her skimpy sari had a gaping tear in it, and its folds were tightly gathered well above her knees, exposing her legs A thorn had scratched her right leg above the knee, making a

raw gash across its tawny brown smoothness. She had covered her face with her hands.

Henry felt a pang of remorse at her plight. Here, Herman, heel" he ordered. "Come to heel -damn you"

The dog did not leave its post -it had chased its quarry and treed it, and it must have been far too excited to remember the finer point of its training. Henry had to produce its leash from his pocket and secure it before it could be dragged away from the tree.

"What's your name?" demanded Henry.

The woman made no reply. She had uncovered her face, and was staring wide eyed at the dog, and at the same time trying to pull down her disarranged hair. And then, when she noticed the tear in it, she burst into tears again.

"Where do you live?" Henry asked, quite gently now. "Tell me, who were you taking the leaf to?"

The woman stopped sobbing and stared at him as though surprised by the gentleness of his tone: her eyes wide and unblinking; but she did not say anything. And for the first time he realized that she was an extraordinarily good looking girl with a firm, full figure which her skimpy garments did little to conceal.

"How much do they pay you for every deer?" "Have you been stealing from my garden before?" "Why don't you take a job?" "you'd earn much more."

It was no use. She continued to stare at him in silence as though she did not understand a word of what he was saying. Henry shrugged his shoulders in despair, feeling deflated -he had caught her stealing his leaf, and now he did not know what to do with her.

"Well," he said, raising his voice again. "If I ever catch you robbing my garden again, I'll give you a thrashing -understand? I'll flog you with a horsewhip, and then hand you over to the police."

At the mention of the police the woman covered her face again and began to sob -her shoulders heaving. Henry watched her in helpless anger, feeling unequal to the situation, and, moved by some quick impulse of compassion, he made up his mind. He walked up the hill to the pathway, deposited his game belt and shotgun on the ground, and tied the dog to a sapling. Then he picked up the sack of leaf. It was heavier than he had thought, and for a moment he wondered how such a mere slip of a girl could have carried it on her head. He half-dragged and half-carried the sack to the tree where he had left her. She was still perched on her branch and she

was shivering with the cold, but she had stopped crying. 'Here, take away your blasted sack,' Henry said to her. 'But remember, if I ever catch you at it again, I'll thrash you until you wish you were dead. Understand?' And he shook his fist at her.

Then he turned and walked back to the birdle path, picked up his gun and partridges, unleashed Herman, and headed for his bungalow. All of a sudden he felt very tired and very hungry, vaguely conscious that he had done something a little unconventional. He had given in to an absurd, purely impulsive weakness of mind which was not in tune with the recognized behaviour-pattern of his calling in the East: you could not run a tea estate if you acquired a reputation that you connived at thieving. He felt slightly ashamed of his softness, and yet, in spite of himself, he also felt strangely elated.

'Damned attractive wench,' Henry muttered to himself as though in explanation. Spoke English too.

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'All the Nines, Ninety-Nine!'

SILENT Hill, Henry Winton's factory garden, was forty-two miles from Chinnar the headquarters of the tea district, forty-two miles by one of Assam's tea-garden roads which were no more than tracks cut into the hill-sides— it took every bit of four hours to cover. But at that, Silent Hill was not as cut off from the world as some of the other gardens in the tea district, at least half a-dozen did not possess even a motorable road— only a narrow, twisting mule-track; and to reach Iamlung, one of the more remote gardens, you had to undergo the dizzy adventure of crossing the hundred foot deep Tista gorge by a swaying rope bridge.

In the mountain areas distances by road were always deceptive, as the crow flew, Silent Hill was barely twenty miles away from Chinnar and on a clear day, from the verandah of Henry's bungalow, you could see the church spire and the red roofs of some of the Chinnar bungalows.

Henry left Silent Hill soon after lunch, planning to get into Chinnar by sundown. He drove his Austin ten expertly, accepting the challenge of the road and enjoying the drive, even keeping an eye open for roadside game, for as always, he had his Holland shot gun beside him in the car. He was already caught up in the mood of the days that lay ahead, days of clean, English fun, and the unaccustomed society of women.

He was going to the Chinnar 'Week' of 1938.

At first it was all downhill, all the way to Tinapuri which was the railhead of the tea district, then the road forked left and began to climb. At Tinapuri you stopped for a cup of tea in the refreshment room of the railway station. An hour later you were high up in the hills once again, making for the Highlands Club at Chinnar. A quick bath and a change, and you could be having a drink in the Summit bar in front of a roaring fire in the midst of what they referred to as a 'gaggle' of planters. But, of course, he would have to spend this evening with Sir Jeffrey and Lady Dart. Perhaps they

would be having a cocktail party at their bungalow; the burra-sahibs were always giving parties during Chinnar Week.

He got into Tinapur just before four. As he drove into the railway station compound, he saw Captain Cockburn's battered old Citroën standing in the porch. Cockburn was the senior manager in the Brindian Tea Company, and he had been in charge of the same garden, Lamlung, for over ten years—Lamlung, the most distant and most inaccessible of all the gardens in the tea district. They said he had stubbornly resisted all attempts to move him from Lamlung. They also said that he was the most successful manager in the district, and possibly in the whole of Assam; and it had been rumoured that he was going to be made the Company's Resident Director at Chinnar as soon as Sir Jeffrey Dart's term of office was over. But Henry for one could hardly visualize a man like Cockburn filling Sir Jeffrey's place. Captain Cockburn was one of those who did not conform; he did not have many friends amongst the planters.

In the station restaurant, Cockburn was sitting slumped in a chair, having a bottle of beer all by himself.

'Good evening, sir,' said Henry.

Cockburn looked up, screwing his eyes against the light. 'Ah, Winton. Got bad news for you. Or have you heard already?'

'No, I've just got in. Tea, boy!' Henry called out to the waiter. 'Jaldi!'

'Bloody road's blocked, landslide.'

'Christ!'

'They say they'll have it cleared by the morning, though.'

'You mean they'll be working through the night?'

'You bet they will; or they'll have Sudden to reckon with.'

'Sudden' was Sir Jeffrey Dart. He was the highest ranking tea man in the district, the biggest of the burra-sahibs.

'Christ!' said Henry again.

The waiter brought the tea-tray and placed it on the table. 'Masta like toss or kike?' he inquired.

Henry waved him away impatiently and began to pour out his tea. It was damned annoying having to go all the way back from Tinapur. He wondered if Cockburn was expecting to be asked to spend the night at Silent Hill; he hoped not. 'I suppose we'd better be heading back,' he said, and then, after a cautious pause, added, 'Or would you care to come up with me, sir?'

'You mean go to Silent Hill? Not on your life!' Cockburn said, shaking his head in disapproval. 'Oh, no.'

Henry was relieved and annoyed at the same time. The way the captain had put it left no doubt in his mind that Cockburn was not at all anxious to spend the night at Silent Hill; Cockburn, grey and wrinkled, seedy and superseded, some said close to being retired and suspected of having gone half native, was turning down an invitation to spend the night at his bungalow.

'Were you thinking of going back all the way to Lamlung?' asked Henry.

Cockburn shook his head again. 'No fear. I propose to spend the night right here.'

'Here? In Tinapiu?'

'That's right Henderson, the station-master has kindly offered to put a bed for me in the waiting room old friend of mine quite a character, Henderson. In the evening, he's threatened to take me to their institute. There's a tamasha on; a gala something or other.'

Henry was stirring his tea 'Gala at the institute,' he said, making a face 'Oh, really! Gala at the local railway institute - sounds pretty ghastly.' In his mind, the word gala was associated with something cheap and noisy something unrefined drunken sailors romping with blind-dated girls in water-front joints. 'Gala' almost automatically fell into place with words like 'chi-chi' and 'honky-tonk', the currency of pidgin English. He wondered what they would think of the idea of having a gala at the Highlands Club.

'Why don't you stop here for the night?' suggested Captain Cockburn.

'Here?' Henry said looking round the room 'Here?'

'They'll bring up a couple of charpoys for us. Don't tell me you were thinking of driving back all the way to Silent Hill. What's your road like now? - It was terrible in Wallach's time.'

'Still pretty bad,' said Henry. He wondered what Cockburn could have had in common with Wallach, with whom he seemed to have been friendly when Wallach was at Silent Hill. drink, of course, women too, almost certainly, they were also said to be keen naturalists, and passionately fond of, of all things, Urdu poetry.

'I certainly don't want to go over that road again if I can help it,' Cockburn said. 'Oh, no. Join me in a beer?'

'No thank you.'

'Boy!' Cockburn called. 'Abdul! Beer-sharap lao, please. Thunda!'

The thought of the cruel drive back to Silent Hill, to a house where the servants had been given the day off, to a room without a fire, to a meal that would have to come out of tins, made Henry say, 'Sure I wouldn't be . . . er, in the way?'

'What! What do you mean "in the way"? I should damn well think not! You can depend on the railway institute to lay on enough fun for both of us, and to spare' and Captain Cockburn laughed and gave Henry a meaningful wink.

The boy brought a bottle of beer and opened it and poured it into Cockburn's glass. Cockburn took a sip and nodded approvingly. 'Thank you, Abdul, bahut mcherbani' he said.

It was almost strange, after five years in the country, to hear someone saying 'please' and 'thank you' to Indian servants, some people said it only spoilt them. But there was certainly no need to call a railway restaurant 'boy' by his first name reflected Henry, or to smile at him.

They had a wash and brush up, and ordered their first chota pegs as soon as the sun went down. They talked about tea and Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, they talked about the Chinnar Week and the wonderful times they had on their last home leave, and about their plans for their next home leave and they talked about women—mostly they talked about women.

'Still got a nice bunch of bibies at Silent Hill' Cockburn wanted to know.

'Not a single one,' Henry told him flatly. 'There was a little too much of that during Wallach's time, too much drink and too many coochee women. That's what finished him.'

'My word, we had some wonderful parties at Silent Hill in those days,' Cockburn said reminiscently. 'Wonderful! Do you mean to say you live without . . . ?'

'That's right' Henry laughed. 'Absolutely without.'

'I'd heard that,' said Cockburn, shaking his head doubtfully. 'I'd heard that—but of course. Well, I shouldn't let Sudden get to hear that, if I were you. He'll think there's something . . . well, something the matter with you.'

'No, there's nothing the matter with me.'

Cockburn sniffed. 'Well, I never,' he said. 'Wonder how long

you'll last. I've always noticed that none of these virtuous, psalm-singing bastards really last. It's just not healthy. I have known . . .'

'I do wish you wouldn't refer to me as a psalm-singing bastard, sir. For one thing I don't profess to be one. But I tell you I'd rather be one than have anything to do with a coolie woman. The very thought gives me the creeps.'

'You don't know what you're missing,' Cockburn laughed. 'In bed, you will never get better value than a coolie woman. Phew! absolutely unrestrained . . . like . . . well, it's love-making at its most volatile; earthy, if you like. You don't know what you're missing. And some of them are damned fine-looking too, if you don't like them all bone-hipped and angular. Saw a santhal girl the other day who was a real stunner; my God, she was luscious! That's the word, by Jove; absolutely mouth-watering!' and Captain Cockburn smacked his lips.

'I'll agree that some of them can be damned good-looking, and not so dark either,' Henry said, thinking of the girl he had caught stealing his tea leaf. 'What did you do?'

'Do?—What do you think? Sent Munsaram, my head boy, to have her report at the bungalow. They sort of expect it, you know. As far as they're concerned, there's no morality involved; not in that class. The moment you get browned off, you pack them off; give them a little money, fifty chips or so, and everything is tickety-bo. It's a great life. Who'd want to get married—tied down, when you're all nicely fixed up? Not me, no, sir!'

'What about the complications?'

'Complications? You mean children? You have such a delightfully refined way of putting things. Don't be absurd; not these days, surely? And even if you do give them a brat, there's nothing to worry about, really. Couple of hundred chips, and they'll find a proud father. You'd be surprised at the number of bastards floating round the tea district. They say even Sudden has fathered one or two. He was a hell of a lad, in his time, old Sudden. Until a few years ago, the managers invariably kept a bibi handy whenever he came inspecting—just in case. It's only in the last few years, after he started gunning for his knighthood, that Sudden became suddenly holier than thou . . .'

Cockburn must have thought he had said something really funny for he gave a loud guffaw and spluttered and went on chuckling for a few seconds. He wagged his finger at Henry and said, 'Ah, he was

a proper hellhound, old Sudden. Don't let him get the impression that you are Christian mission; don't give Sudden a handle. He knows a good planter when he sees one; he knows even better what makes a good planter good.'

They had two chota-pegs before dinner, and later, when Henderson, the station-master of Tinapur, came to take them away to the railway institute, they all had more drinks. It was after ten when they drove to the institute.

The railway institute at Tinapur was like any other railway institute in India; almost as though they were all designed and furnished by the same contractor. There was a large, rectangular building with a large, rectangular central hall as its main feature and several small rooms nestling at either end. On one side there was a narrow strip of garden, filled mainly with croton bushes and potted plants; on the other there were two tennis courts. The main hall had a wooden floor and a raised platform at one end. On weekdays, the younger people played badminton in the hall, and the elders played bridge and bezique and rummy at tables placed on the stage. On Saturday nights, the younger people danced and the elders sat on chairs placed along the wall and watched. Once a month, they held galas, which meant that the band played until three in the morning, and for those who did not dance there was house-house, and a racing game called escalado. On gala nights, too, they ran a rum bar in one of the back rooms, although, since the institute did not possess a bar licence, you were not supposed to talk about it.

'Fire,' said Mr. Henderson, leading them to a reserved table. 'Ere, let's sit'n enjoy ourselves, eh?' and he beckoned to a white-coated waiter and told him to bring three lemonades. 'Make them extra-strong,' he said to the waiter, and gave him a conspiratorial wink.

On the stage, a tall young man with a very bony and very pale face topped with a thick mop of lustrous black hair, and with large, raw-looking hands, was calling out the numbers in a house-house game, 'All the nines, ninety-nine! Downing street, number ten!'

'That's Eddie Trevor,' Henderson remarked with unconcealed pride. 'Captain of the railway 'ockey team; plays centre-forward. Such stick work!'

Then Henry remembered. When he was in Bombay, nearly a year

earlier, a friend in Burmah-Shell had dragged him to the Aga Khan hockey finals. That was when he had first seen Eddie Trevor, playing for the Calcutta team, in the centre forward position. And even Henry, who was not really interested in hockey, could not help being struck by Trevor's speed and dash and his amazing control over the ball. Trevor was obviously the star of the side, the one man on whom the team depended, and also the man the crowd expected to provide the thrills. And Trevor was playing to the gallery, conscious of the adulation, pulling off the most audacious passes. And when he had shot the only goal of the match, the entire crowd had risen as one man and burst into prolonged cheers, 'Shabash, Eddie. Well done Eddie!'

And now here was Eddie Trevor, two thousand miles away from Bombay, attending a railway institute gala, still very much the star of the show, still playing to a gallery.

'I thought his face was familiar,' Cockburn said. 'Must have seen his photograph somewhere.'

'It's always coming out in the papers. Went to Berlin with the Olympic team. They keep two men on him all the time. You've no idea how the girls in Berlin fell for him! He's got lots of letters. Ah, here's our drinks. Not so posed to drink here, but you care? On a gala day you just forget these things and sit and enjoy yourself. That's our motto.'

'Very sound motto too,' said Cockburn. 'Here's luck!'

'Clickety click, sixty-six! Unlucky for some thirteen!' Eddie Trevor was calling out in a deep singsong voice.

'We often have a case of fifty rupees and more, etc,' said Henderson.

'Really?' said Cockburn politely. 'As much as that?'

'Doctor's orders, number nine! One and seven, sweet seventeen! All the threes, thirty-three!'

He certainly seemed to find no difficulty with his th sounds, Henry thought. Most Eurasians pronounced it as though it were a soft 't'.

'Kelley's eye, number one! Dinky doo, twenty-two.'

'Halt, halt!' a woman in a green satin dress with sequins called out in a tremulous triumphant shriek. 'House! House!'

'Take your partners for a rumba,' someone was announcing. 'No feeling shy now, come on, boys and girls, come on, girls and boys!'

'You wouldn't like to dance?' enquired Henderson.

'I can't dance,' said Cockburn. 'Not the rumba, at any rate.'

'Neither can I,' said Henry quickly. He certainly had no wish to become a participant in a railway institute gala; it was bad enough to be a spectator, however privileged.

The members of the Tinapur railway institute certainly could dance the rumba, or any other dance you could have named, from the hula-hula to the belly-dance, collectively, that was the one thing they could do better than almost any other group of men and women anywhere else. They danced with zest, they danced with verve, and abandon, and skill, putting their hearts and souls into it; they twined and twirled around, sometimes hugging their partners close and sometimes letting them go altogether, laughing and holding their hands high above their head and flinging their heads back and moving backwards and forwards. They danced with concentration and without talking to their partners, they were not unlike bullfighters and wrestlers going about their business, and yet there was nothing restrained, nothing inhibited in their movements. Their faces shone with sweat, their eyes shone with ecstasy. You could not have seen dancing like that anywhere else in the world—except possibly at another railway institute.

'Who's that?' Cockburn leaned forward in his chair. 'My word she's terrific!'

'Oo?' asked Henderson. 'Where?'

'That girl dancing with thingunabob—the hockey chap—the one in the blue dress.'

'Oh, you mean Ruby Miranda. Real peach, no?'

'I should say so,' agreed Cockburn.

'Would you like to meet her? I'll go round and bring her over,' offered Mr. Henderson. 'Hi, Ruby! Rumba-girl,' he shouted gaily across the dance floor, waving his hand at her.

Ruby Miranda threw back her head and grinned and waved mechanically at the station-master, then turned and looked again at the two Englishmen sitting with him, this time with a sudden quickening of interest, and smiled again. Her partner, Eddie Trevor, looked at them too, and frowned, and said something that made her laugh, then he gathered her close to him and whirled her away from them, almost lifting her off her feet, somehow injecting into the rumba the mad circlings of a Viennese waltz. By Jove, she's nice to look at, Henry thought, with the sort of lush, overflowing

loveliness one sees only in films; bold and flashy and dark, but nished black hair falling on smooth tan shoulders, a clinging, satiny, ice-blue dress daringly low-cut and showing off a lovely figure, and he was stabbed by a slight, unreasoning pang of jealousy towards her partner.

When the dance was over Henderson excused himself and went to talk to some friends at the other end of the room. He came back a few minutes later, holding Ruby Miranda by the elbow. Her face was flushed from exertion and her lips were slightly parted, and at the moment, Henry could not think of anyone he had ever seen who was more beautiful.

'Meet Captain Cockburn, my dear' Henderson made the introductions. 'And this is Mr Wilson

'Winton,' Henry corrected.

'Sorry, Winton. This is Miss Miranda. Her father is the loco shed foreman 'ere.'

Ruby sat at their table not saying much just speaking when she was spoken to sitting up straight and not quite at ease. She refused a drink but when Henry held out his cigarette case, she accepted a cigarette, saying, 'I don't mind if I do, tank you.' She had strong, even teeth and a glowing olive skin, impudent eyes and glossy black hair falling in a soft roll over her shoulders. When the next dance was announced Eddie Trevor walked purposefully up to their table said 'Excuse me,' very formally, without a smile or a look at any one of them, and took her away to dance.

'Stroirdmanly fetching bit of skit that' Captain Cockburn pronounced.

'My God!' said Henry as they came out into the cold air some two hours later.

'Why "my God"?' asked Cockburn.

'The atmosphere! You could have cut it with a knife, the accent, and the chalk powder and the perfume—Anglo-India at play! . . . ough.'

'A nice bunch of popsies, though, smashing some of them.'

'I suppose they were, only . . .'

'Not quite Highlands Club, what? Not quite pukka-sahib.'

'Ummm, yes.'

'And thank God for that! A single girl like that Ruby Miranda

is worth the whole pack of your ice-cold Highlands Club females, cats without claws and all the fun drained out. Give me the railway institute every time, and you can keep the Highlands Club.'

'How old do you think she would be?' asked Henry.

'Who, Ruby Miranda? About twenty-three, I should say. Not much more. They . . . er, fill out early. My word, she's certainly beautifully proportioned, what?'

'Oh, yes, very well proportioned.'

'And the eyes, yes, the eyes of the real Chandni-Chowk whore, black and bold, how the Urdu poets would have gone into raptures about them, Hannu, or Aleem-din! And that figure too, the figure of the harem favourite; yes, the Urdu poets would have raved. ' . . . gone into raptures over details of anatomy, verse after verse of erotica . . . they certainly knew how to do these things, the Urdu poets: you should read them some day.' That's the sort of woman who would make the Highlands Club women turn green with envy. What wouldn't some of the planters give to have someone like that, you know, tucked away at their gardens . . . ? Who'd want to go running off to Calcutta? That's it, that would seem to be your answer, why don't you take her on?'

'How do you mean, take her on?'

'Why, give her a job man. That's the sort of woman who will stop you from going crazy in that antiseptic bungalow of yours.'

'It's a tempting thought, sir, Henry conceded. 'Very tempting'

Later, in the darkness of the railway station waiting room, lying on the hard wooden bed provided by Mr. Henderson and staring blankly through the gauze of the mosquito net Henry's thoughts kept going back to Ruby Miranda, the bold roving eyes of a Chandni Chowk whore and the full-blown contours of a harem favourite not that he, Henry Winton, had ever come across a Chandni-Chowk whore. He wouldn't really mind having someone like her at Silent Hill, slipping in and out of his bungalow . . . Antiseptic, Cockburn had called it.

'What sort of pay would she want, do you think?' he asked.

'Who?'

'That girl Ruby Miranda.'

'Oh, I should think around a hundred rupees a month. That's about what her father must be making, as the loco-shed foreman; certainly not much more. Why, have you a job you can give her?'

'I've only just thought of it. I want an extra teacher for my school. There are easily a hundred children at Silent Hill of primary school age, and the damned schools inspector has been going at me to take on another teacher. I could offer her a hundred a month, but I shall have to make her the head teacher for that.'

'That sort of appointment would be perfectly within your powers as manager.'

'D'you suppose she'll be able to teach?'

'I'm sure she will but does it matter?' From his voice, Henry felt that Cockburn was chuckling to himself.

'No, I don't suppose it does. Only, Sarkar, my present school-master, is bound to resent having a having a new entrant as headmistress. Do you suppose she'll want to come to Silent Hill as a teacher?'

'Jump at it, Cockburn said. Oh jump at it. That's your answer then depending of course on what the Olympic hockey team has to say about it.'

Henry knew that Cockburn was still chuckling.

3

Chinnar often went to your head

THE next morning, although they had not received any further information as to whether the road-block had been cleared, they decided to proceed to Chinnar. 'The drive will clear our heads,' said Henry.

'The road will have been cleared all right,' Cockburn told him confidently. 'As it is, the big white god of tea must have had a few things to say to the road chaps—you can't have the damned road blocked and holding up traffic during the Chinnar Week.'

'Anyone very special coming up this year?' asked Henry.

'No idea. The usual lot, I suppose; no one really big. There'll be Meril and Tiggs and Snelson

'The General?'

'That's right, General Snelson; and theré'll be the usual tea and shipping crowd from Calcutta. That's all I know of. Maybe a couple or two from home. You putting up at the Club?'

'No, I am staying with Sir Jeffrev'

Cockburn pursed his lips and gave Henry a long stare. 'You been up to something, or just being singled out?'

Henry laughed. 'I really don't know. I'd booked myself a bed at the Club, and Mrs. Maitland had given me a nice corner room; then on Thursday I got a chit from Lady Dart asking me to stay with them during the Week. Personally, I'd much rather be in the Club, on my own; much less stuff'

'You'd better watch out,' Cockburn warned. 'When a fairly junior manager like yourself . . . How much service have you put in, six years? No, nearer five. I should say, since you haven't gone off on your second home leave yet. Well, as I was saying, when a relatively junior manager gets asked to stay with the Resident Director during the Chinnar Week, dammit, there's something brewing; definitely. Sort of thing that would give me the jumps. Usually, it means they want to keep you, sort of, under observation—that is, if they suspect you have been going a little wild. Like

Patterson, remember how he was for ever being asked to stay with the RD just before they terminated his contract? But knowing you... my God! anything less wild would be difficult to imagine, what? I say, they haven't got a hopeful in the house, have they? a niece or something they want to get married off?

'Not that I know of.'

'Perhaps one of the visiting people from home, they may have a filly on their hands. Whatever it is I should keep my head. It can be jolly tucky, you know, they go for you with bared teeth.'

The thought of a filly from England going for him with bared teeth made Henry laugh. 'I'd be really surprised if they produced something like that in Chinnar, of all places, something that was really capable of going to your head,' he said. Then he added, 'Something like that Miranda girl.'

Cockburn laughed. 'Well, if Tinapuri can produce someone like Ruby Miranda, there's no reason why Chinnar, with all its resources, shouldn't do as well or better. Lord! If they really have someone on their hands, might be bloody awkward keeping on the right side of Sudden and his memsahib and at the same time repelling some desperate maiden they may be trotting out.'

'On the other hand, it might be quite exciting.'

'Not the sort of excitement that a young and ambitious planter should get himself mixed up with,' said Captain Cockburn.

'And you can take that as coming from someone who has seen what happens to those who indulge in this kind of sport. You keep to the coolie women and you'll never have any problems on your hands. As Sudden himself would be the first to advise you. Or, since you happen to be a congenital colour snob, acquire something like what you saw last night, Ruby something or the other. Terrific value for money and no complications save as houses. Have your fun by all means so long as you know it is fun.'

As he ate tinned sausages and fried potatoes in the railway refreshment room at Tinapuri, Henry Winton's thoughts went racing back to the previous night and to Ruby Miranda. He caught himself visualizing the stir amongst the planters' wives if he took someone like her to a Highlands Club dance. But, of course, you could not expect to get away with anything like that, not in the Highlands Club, in fact it would be enough to get yourself black-balled in all the clubs in India. The protocol was terribly strict on that sort of thing, it was as much as your job was worth.

Well, keep your head. Either Sudden is keeping you under observation or Kitty's planning to unload some repulsive maiden on you. It's slaughter either way! Keep your head,' and Cockburn's pebble-grey eyes surrounded by wrinkles were dead serious as he said it

Chinnai, six thousand odd feet above sea level, was the headquarters of the tea district. That's where the Resident Directors of the three big tea companies lived, that's where the administrative offices were, that's where you yourself hoped to get towards the end of your service in India if you weren't too wild when you were young or too subdued when you were middle aged, and if, of course, you had played the game according to the local rules all the way hadn't stepped on too many toes. There were a formidable lot of 'ifs' in the way of your ending up as a Resident Director.

When he came to it first, Chinnai had seemed a little artificial to Henry Winton, like frosting on a cake placed permanently in the shop window, a little too highly coloured, a little too ornate and eye-catching, more aggressively and self-consciously English country than any place in England itself you could think of. But gradually he had become used to Chinnai and grown to like it, accepting its values without question, sharing its taboos, deeply aware that there could be no other place in the world like Chinnai, grateful above all for its self-conscious primness, its air of undefiled exclusiveness.

Owned entirely by the three giant tea companies, Chinnai was private as a Maharaja's preserve, a vast, rolling playground in the midst of some of the best hunting country in India. Once you were in Chinnai, you were in a different world, a cleaner and a richer world, a more refined, aloof, sanitary world, a world of more intensified values where the black was always charcoal black and the white chalk white, and there were very few shades in between, a world of rigid protocol and dressing for dinner and minding your Ps and Qs, a world also of tea and tennis afternoons and bridge parties with the buriasahibs' menisahibs and sedate, decorous, lunch parties and chamber music and once a-week dances, and perfumed, bare-shouldered, avid, aquiescent, middle-ageing women out-numbered three to one by the men and living in a permanent haze of male adoration. For a man coming to Chinnai from the quarantine of a far flung tea-garden the place was almost guaranteed to go to his head.

You drove to Chinnar from the railhead at Tinapur on a smooth, company-owned tarmac road that went snaking impudently through the hills in a series of hairpin bends, so narrow that you could not pass an oncoming car except at certain fixed points. Several times during the year, Chinnar was cut off from Tinapur, and therefore from the outside world, by a landslide or a heavy fall of snow or even by the falling of a tree across the road, and once a cow elephant had held up the mail van for a whole day. But the management always saw to it that the road was never blocked for long, and it was almost unthinkable that any mishap to the road would be allowed to hold up traffic during the Chinnar Week.

'Sudden will raise Cain if they don't get it cleared overnight,' Cockburn had said, and, sure enough, by the time their cars came to the place where there had been a landslide they had already got the road going. It seemed that the foreman had had two groups working in alternate shifts all night, and the men were just about to break up looking grimy and pinched with the cold but very cheerful and grinning.

'The poor bastards,' said Cockburn, and much to Henry's surprise he called the men up to him and congratulated them. Then he took out his wallet and handed two ten rupee notes to the foreman. 'Buy some rum with that to lace your tea with,' he said to the men, 'and mind you don't get drunk and beat up your wives,' and they cheered lustily as the cars passed through. Henry could not help wishing that he had thought of rewarding the men like that. It was a little different from saying 'please' and 'thank you' to them all the time.

Your service as a tea man began at Chinnar, that was where you went on first arrival to 'make your number' with your Resident Director and to do the round of calling as prescribed by the calling list put up on the notice board of the Highlands Club. After that first visit, you went as often as you could make it, normally every week end, and indeed, if you were not seen in Chinnar for more than two consecutive week ends, your RD would be likely to call for an explanation from you, and would make some sort of remark in your confidential book such as that you were inclined to be a little too retiring or that you did not altogether conform.

If Chinnar was in some ways the centre of the North-Western Assam tea-planter's world, the centre of Chinnar itself was the

Highlands Club, part hotel, part sports club, a generously, even extravagantly subsidized institution maintained jointly by the three giants of the tea world so that their planters should not be deprived of what were regarded as the normal relaxations of an English way of life. For ten rupees a month, the Highlands Club offered you boating, trout fishing, cricket, golf, tennis, squash, clay pigeon shooting, and, of course, a whole variety of indoor games. You could live in the well appointed Club quarters and eat some of the best food in India and pay no more than five rupees a day, inclusive of room rent. The Club had accommodation for fifteen couples and twice as many bachelors in its permanent buildings, and whenever there was a rush they used to put up a number of double fly tents on permanently built concrete platforms which had built-in brick fireplaces of their own, and which were just as comfortable as the pukka rooms. No one was ever turned away from the Highlands Club for want of accommodation: that is, if you were a planter or an acceptable guest introduced by one of the members and of course all white. The Highlands Club even had a neat row of brick and mortar dog kennels for the dogs of visiting members.

From the Summit bar of the Club you could get a breath-taking view of the hills towards Inapuri, told upon told of dark green forest interspersed inevitably with enormous patches of tea cultivation making regular criss-cross patterns on the hill sides. The Summit bar was the mixed bar: the other bar was the men's bar where you could not take women. From the main dining verandah, you overlooked the artificial lake which gave the township its water supply: its electricity, its boating, trout fishing, and even its waterfall. Beyond the lake was the golf course, and still farther away, the expanse of man-high wild grass dotted with carefully preserved clumps of trees where the annual rough shoot took place - a day long drive for red jungle cock, chukor, hare and three kinds of pheasant.

As far as Henry Winton was concerned, the rough shoot was the high point of the Chinnar Week. He had no illusions about his shooting, but he knew he was getting better and better. There was no reason why, within a year or two, he should not make the Brindian shooting team, and then, who knows, with a bit of luck in the draw for the butts. It was a giddy thought but, given the right butts, he might just be able to bring it off.

A mile or so through the grass, on the downward slope of the hill, was the game cottage, the pride and speciality of Chinnar. Because of the fold in the hill, you could not actually see the game cottage from the Club itself, or even from the golf course, and indeed you had to get really close before you could see it because of the heavy camouflage.

The game cottage of the Highlands Club was a sturdy wooden hut built high up in a tree, and it overlooked a patch of forest which had been converted into a combination of water-hole and salt lick. The water hole was no more than a bed of ooze about the size of a tennis court, but it was the only one of its kind within a mile. During the summer months, its water dried up altogether and the surface became hard and brittle, in the drier months, there was no reason for any of the wild animals in the vicinity to visit the particular patch of forest overlooked by the game cottage. The difficulty had been neatly solved to attract game to its cottage, the management of the Club had provided an artificial salt lick.

How much rock salt, how much jaggery, how many pounds of powdered mohwa flowers, and how much common Highlands earth went into the mixture that was assiduously poured over the water hole every other week, was known only to the officials of the Highlands Club. They say that Jim Corbett had been called up to give advice, as well as one of the game wardens from Kenya. The fact remains that the mixture was highly successful and the salt lick attracted game in quite implausible numbers throughout the year.

You could almost bank on seeing a bison or two, and on a good night deer and wild pig and possibly a leopard or an elephant. If you gave sufficient notice and were sufficiently important in the tea world, the Club could even produce a tiger, and twice, once for Lord Haverell, the President of the Bindra Company, and once for the Governor of Assam, they had even laid on a demonstration of a tiger making a kill.

Any member of the Club could hire the game cottage for fifteen rupees a night, and for that price the Club included the use of an electric light fixed high up in the branches of the tree above the cottage to simulate an artificial moon. The Club also gave you a packet of sandwiches and a thermos flask of tea or coffee, and you could go off with a book and a flashlight and spend the night in the cottage and observe wild life in the light of the artificial moon,

or he in bed listening to the jungle sounds, knowing that there was no other human being within a mile.

In no circumstances were you allowed to take a fire-arm with you; the Club was very strict on that point. Also, for three months in the year March to May, you were not permitted to smoke in the cottage, or indeed, to take up any matches with you. During the hotter months, the tall grass and the jungle surrounding the salt-lick became completely dry, and a carelessly dropped match or a cigarette end might well cause a forest fire.

The observation verandah ran all along one side of the cottage, and it had a long, comfortable, cushioned bench running its entire length. That was where you sat to watch the game. From the verandah a short passage led to the open window at the back of the cottage where a rope and pulley had been installed to bring up light luggage. On one side of the passage was the bedroom containing two narrow single beds like bunks in a railway sleeper. On the other side was the bathroom.

Once you were in the cottage you were separated from the world as though transported to a different planet. The nearest human habitation was Chinnai, at least a mile and a half away as the crow flew, your contact with the earth depended on two frail-looking ladders. There was nothing but the jungle round you, dark and impenetrable. Often when you were alone in the game cottage, you felt an overwhelming sense of awe, your isolation heightened by the night, knowing that you could not get away, whatever happened, until sunrise the next morning.

4

'The Empire is a hellish big thing'

As Henry parked his car, Damian, Sir Jeffrey's number one boy, ran up to him, salaamed, and began taking his things out.

'Burra sahib is out on the lawn, sir,' he said to Henry. 'Lady-sahib has gone out to show the falls to the other saablogs. I will show the sahib to his rooms.'

'Other saablogs?' asked Henry. He had no idea there was anyone else staying with Sir Jeffrey. 'Other managers?'

'No sir, guests from bilavat.'

Oh, from England—who are they?

Colonel Walters and his memsahib.

'I see.'

'Also miss sahib.' Damian said, looking sharply at Henry. 'Jean miss-sahib.'

'I see,' Henry said, remembering Cockburn's words. 'Someone with a hopeful on their hands?' he wondered. 'Was that why he had been invited to stay at the Resident Director's house? They were either keeping you under observation or they were trotting out a filly. Cockburn had said you had been up to something—or you were being singled out. Henry did not need to be kept under observation, thank God, nor had he been up to anything. It was the girl, then—must be the girl. He looked at Damian again. One never knew just how much these Indian servants knew. Was there a hint of a smile on Damian's face? He, Henry, would always think twice before employing an English speaking servant in his house. 'I'll go and say "hullo" to the burra sahib,' he said breezily. 'On the lawn, you said?'

But Damian looked uncomfortable. 'Please wait. Burra-sahib has his head watchman with him. I'll go and see if he is free.'

'Head watchman? What nonsense!'

'John Trevor sahib. He was burra-sahib's watchman when sahib was manager. Eddie Trevor's father,' the Goan explained with obvious pride. 'The hockey star. He often comes to see the burra-sahib.'

'Oh, does he?' said Henry, frowning.

The boy went off to see if Sir Jeffrey were free, leaving Henry in his elegantly furnished suite of rooms opening on to the back verandah. He returned almost immediately. 'The sahib will be free in ten minutes, sir,' he said. 'Shall I bring you some tea; or a drink?'

'No,' said Henry, trying not to show his irritation. Was he being put in his place? he asked himself. Since when did a manager have to be kept waiting because the Resident Director was busy with a watchman? He sat down and lit a cigarette, realizing that he was feeling just a little nervous.

He had finished his cigarette and was staring vacantly out of the window when he noticed a dark, tubby little man wearing a rumpled brown suit come into the verandah from the side of the house. So that was the head watchman, the man for whom he had been kept waiting. As Henry watched, the man walked up to the hat-stand in the verandah and picked up a battered, quilted sola topee. He put on the hat and studied his face in the mirror, twirling his moustaches into shape. Then he walked into the sitting-room, still with his sun-hat on, and Henry had to come out into the verandah to see what he was up to. He saw the man go up to the corner table, open the large silver cigar-box kept there, pick up a handful of cigars and put them into his pocket. Then he walked out, pausing before the hat-stand mirror once more to look at himself.

'The impudence! Infernal cheek!' said Henry to himself. 'I must speak to the old boy about it.'

He was still thinking about the tubby little Eurasian in his rumpled brown suit daring to help himself to Sudden's precious Corona cigars when Damian came to tell him that Sir Jeffrey would see him.

Sir Jeffrey Dart, Resident Director of the Brindian Tea Company and the ranking tea man in the North-West Assam highlands, was known as 'Sudden' Dart to the very few people who might be in the correct age group and the correct financial and social bracket. If he was aware that behind his back most of the people in the tea district referred to him by this nickname, he took good care not to show it. He was sitting in a deck-chair placed under a shady sal tree, but he was sitting bolt upright, peering at the previous day's *Statesman* held as far away from his face as his arms would stretch.

He wore a canary-yellow half-sleeved flannel shirt, bottle-green shorts, hand-knitted woollen stockings, and heavily studded leather golf shoes. He was a large, thickset, hairy, beetle-browed man in his middle fifties who had resolutely refused to give in to the demands of age. His face, arms, and knees were brick-red in colour, and his thick hair was completely white. He gave an impression of rugged strength and power, of uncompromising toughness. As it happened, this was exactly the impression he strove to create.

'Hullo, Winton,' he said, taking his own time to look up from his paper. 'So they've done up the road.'

'Yes, sir,' answered Henry, thinking that the last time he had seen him Sir Jeffrey had addressed him as Henry. 'Apparently they worked all night in shifts.'

'Good,' said Sudden without enthusiasm. 'The mem's gone out. Taken the Walters to show them the waterfall. I don't suppose you know Colonel Walters. Army people, the Punjab Regiment, retired. They're friends of Lord Haverell, it seems. You could have gone with them if you had turned up last evening. Matter of fact, I didn't expect you here quite so early this morning. What is it now?—just past eleven. I make it. Didn't expect you until lunch time, at the earliest, all the way from Silent Hill.'

Not a word of explanation about being kept waiting for a watchman, Henry noticed. In fact, the old man might be ticking him off for turning up earlier than he had been expected. And for the first time the thought crossed his mind that Sudden might be deliberately putting him in his place, that his being invited to stay for the Chinua Week had nothing to do with his Resident Director's wife's trotting out a filly for his inspection even though admittedly, a filly seemed to be on hand.

'I stopped at Tinapur for the night, Captain Cockburn and I,' said Henry, and even as he said it realized that he had made a mistake.

'Tinapur?' Sudden asked, frowning. 'Tinapur?'

'My lights weren't too good, and Cockburn seemed to know the station master well. He arranged a couple of beds for us in the waiting room...'

'Cockburn is always chumming up with the wrong kind of people,' pronounced Sudden with a disapproving look. 'I didn't know you were particularly friendly with Cockburn.'

'He's not a special friend, sir, it just happened...'

'Well, never mind,' Sudden cut in, waving his hand impatiently as though he were swiping at some invisible insect. 'There are one or two things I want to talk to you about. I would like to get them over before the others come back. What's this trouble you've been having at Silent Hill?

'Trouble, sir! None at all.'

'No, er . . . trouble with women?'

'No, sir.'

Sir Jeffrey leaned back in his chair. What with his yellow-and-green garb and his red hands and face, he looked like an enormous insect, a hornet, or a blue bottle, thought Henry; a yellow-and-red hornet lying on its back and puffing at a black cigar. Henry waited for him to speak.

'First, the schools inspector has written to say that you are understaffed. Not that school appointments have really much to do with me, but he wants you to take on at least one more teacher.'

Henry had the answer to that one. 'I was trying to keep the overheads down sir, we do need a couple of teachers, the way the number of the children keeps rising, but . . .'

'No use putting the Government's back up. Don't forget they have an Indian now as inspector of schools.'

'I was only trying to keep the overheads down.'

'I quite see that. But you don't know your Indian official. Give him a handle and he'll take the bit between his teeth,' said Sir Jeffrey, mixing his metaphors recklessly. Education is the favourite grouse of the Indian politician and the Englishman his favourite whipping boy.'

'As it happens, I am taking on an extra teacher. I am already, er . . . trying to find someone suitable.'

'Good. I know you have to be careful. Don't take on any of these Bengali graduates. They're all Bolsheviks, damned trouble-mongers every one of them.'

'Right-ho, sir.'

That was when, just as Henry had begun to feel comfortable about the interview, that Sir Jeffrey had dropped his bombshell.

'And what is this about your trying to shoot down some young woman?' he asked.

'Shooting down? Oh, no sir! Absolutely nothing like that!'

'I don't see how you can say there was no incident like that when Arkell, the police superintendent himself, was telling me about it.'

He has received orders to investigate ... A complaint some man made that you were trying to ... hmmm ... trying to molest his niece; that you loosed off a shot at her, and then set your dog on her and freed her, and then threatened to flog her ...'

'Christ!' exclaimed Henry, feeling quite shaken. 'Christ! but the woman was a thief, running away with a whole sackful of leaf; I've been having quite a lot of leaf stolen, these past few weeks ...' 'I believe she's an extraordinarily good looking girl,' said Sudden. 'So Arkell tells me. He has questioned the woman, of course, and her complaint seems to have been substantially true.'

'There is a perfectly good explanation, sir,' Henry began, 'I swear I fired at a pheasant ...'

But Sir Jeffrey was obviously in no mood to listen to explanations. He put up a large, pink, hairy hand, and said, 'And Jugal Kishore, the woman's uncle or something, swears that you had fired a shot at her and tried to rape her, and it seems this man has quite a lot of influence with some of the ministers. Mind you, I don't ever, I have never objected, to any of my young men having their fun with the women on their gardens, but one must draw the line right there you know, you can't go running after ... er, respectable women, with guns or set dogs upon them.'

So it was Jugal Kishore. It would be someone like him Henry thought, to cook up something like this. Jugal Kishore had always been a troublesome man, always trying to get the coolies to become group-minded, forming labour committees, getting them into camps and discussing their living conditions and making them put up their demands jointly.

If he didn't nip it in the bud, Henry was sure they would soon be forming labour unions in his garden, and then there would be hell to pay. That was the sort of nonsense Wallach, his predecessor, had fostered that he, Henry Winton had put down with a heavy hand after he had taken over. Wallach was always a little unorthodox attempting to introduce the privileges enjoyed by British labour into Assam, forgetting that if the Indian coolies were to be treated as the equals of English labourers, it would wreck the entire tea industry. It was not surprising that Jugal Kishore had been one of Wallach's favourite men. Henry suspected him of being the man behind most of the demands put forward by his coolies. He had sent for him at the office once and warned him, in no uncertain terms, that unless he refrained from taking part in labour activities,

he would stop his increments. Was this Jugal Kishore's way of hitting back?

But this was no time to be telling Sudden that Jugal Kishore was a trouble-maker, what Sudden called a 'Bolshy'; shifty, facile, cunning, ugly - God! he was ugly, with the blunted, puffy roundness of feature, the opaque, half closed eyes of the low-caste East Indian. And for a moment, Henry found himself wondering how anyone as singularly repulsive as Jugal Kishore could have any kinship with so good-looking a woman as the one Sudden Dart was talking about.

'It can be easily proved that I had fired the shot at a pheasant . . ' Henry began.

But Sudden Dart stopped him again, a little impatiently this time. 'All this defence will not be necessary, you are not going to be dragged into court, thank God. Arkell has promised to see to that. But I wouldn't get into scrapes of this kind, if I were you; scrapes over women. There are - er, more discreet ways of finding one's fun on a plantation. When are you due for home leave?

Henry was startled by the abrupt change of topic, he did not like the reference to his home leave. It was quite a serious matter if they were actually thinking in terms of packing him off on leave. Sudden must know perfectly well that he was not due for home leave for another eighteen months.

'Not for quite a while sir, not until 1940,' he said.

'You don't want to go sooner, do you? It would be damned awkward of course, but I could arrange for you to take your leave now. Y'know, perhaps a spot of home leave would . . . well, sort of restore the balance after all this, er - loneliness on a tea garden. I understand that you were rather overdoing it in the beginning; that you were going rather Christian mission. Bound to affect one. . .

'There's nothing the matter with me, sir,' said Henry very firmly. 'And I really would not like to go on leave now, out of turn.'

Unaccountably, Sudden's face broke into a smile. 'Good, I'm glad of that,' he said, and his voice was no longer edgy. 'Matter of fact, I can ill afford to send any of my managers on leave out of turn, as you very well know, fouls up the whole schedule. But anything to avoid a scandal, with the state of politics here.'

That was the familiar note, and Henry knew that there was nothing more to worry about. Sudden had to have his say when

something like this was reported to him, he was only doing his duty, and God knows he was doing it well. Henry, on his part, could not bring himself to blame him. But now that the air had been cleared, an unpleasant obligation meticulously performed, there was nothing more to worry about.

'The Indian National Congress has failed miserably in Assam, Sudden went on. 'They have not been able to collar more than thirty five seats in the Assembly, thirty-five out of a hundred and-eight. So no party has a working majority. They've had to form a coalition - and you know what coalitions are - at the best of times catch as catch can - bloody shambles! No one can say how the pattern will shift from day to day. You see that old boy, don't you?'

It was wonderful to be addressed as 'old boy' again. 'Yes, sir,' said Henry gratefully and marvelling at Sudden's insight into Indian politics.

'You never know who is going to be a minister when. Every one's trying, it's catch as catch can - and no holds barred - and the man they are all gunning for is someone like you and me. Bear that in mind.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Just as well Arkell is here to quash everything,' Sudden went on. 'But if we'd had an Indian police superintendent here I should hate to think where this sort of thing would have led us. They simply love to get their teeth into a juicy scandal - y'know - particularly if there's an Englishman involved. Just as well I have - er, I have a little personal influence with the Governor. His Excellency himself has promised that so long as I'm the head man in the tea district he will see that no Indian district officers are posted here. But they can't - can't always do as much as they would like to, y'know. You will be careful in future - old boy - won't you?'

'Yes, sir,' said Henry.

'Remember that the Empire is a hellish big thing, but in the last analysis it is nothing more than a few thousand of - of hard-core men like you and me, doing our jobs and taking care not to let the side down.'

Only a man like Sudden Dart could have carried off a speech like that - thought Henry, not without a little admiration - and also not without a touch of pride at being included in the inner circle of the hard-core men who represented the British Empire. Also, now that Sudden had reverted to pattern - he was more than ever sure that

the incident about the woman, Jugal Kishore's niece had left no sediment

'Yes, sir,' said Henry again

'And please don't try to keep things from me. If anything like this happens, it is just as well to come and tell me everything. I can . . . er, always grease the proper wheels nearly always. That's what I'm here for. But I must know how to play it damn it! If you'd given me your version of the incident, I should have had an easier time with Arkell. As it was, you never said a word, and all I could do was to get him to try and buy the man off.'

'Buy him off!' exclaimed Henry. 'Buy off a man like Jugal Kishore!'

'That's right. Arkell brought pressure on the man to withdraw his complaint. We had to pay something too, but not much. The police in India have their own methods . . .'

'They certainly seem to have.'

'As I was saying,' went on Sudden, 'all I could do was to get him to let us off on the promise that I would see that it didn't happen again. His job's getting pretty difficult too, y'know. Any suggestion of favouritism towards an Englishman will raise absolute hell in their Assembly and their press.'

'But there is such a thing as the truth, sir.'

'The truth is the first casualty in such affairs. Sir Jeffrey pronounced pompously. 'Always. No one worries his head about the truth when he can get his teeth into a scandal. Must say I was surprised. From what I have seen of you, I should have thought . . . well, any trouble with water would have been hummm quite inconceivable. Then Sudden went off at a tangent and asked, 'How's your yield at Silent Hill?'

'Steady average between six thousand and seven thousand every day . . leaf,' Henry told him.

'Hummm' said Sir Jeffrey non-committally, although Henry knew that he was deliberately withholding praise as a matter of principle. 'Of course, you won't be able to keep it up when things begin to get dry. Still . . . Now perhaps you'd like to go and have a wash and brush up. Join me for a drink as soon as you're ready. I let's see, half an hour from now.'

And Sir Jeffrey Dart picked up his *Statesman*

5

Sunday Tiffin

ALTHOUGH it was one of those crisply cold October days, Henry took a cold shower because he thought a cold shower would clear the fuzziness out of his head. He stood in the dressing room for a long while, shivering and naked, trying to make up his mind what to wear. He chose his grey flannel trousers and his blue blazer and his old school tie. Somehow, this seemed to have a bracing effect on his spirits. For a moment, he toyed with the idea of not joining Sudden on the lawn until he was sent for, but he rejected it at once. Whatever had happened was no fault of Sudden's, it was that man Jugal Kishore. Indeed, Sudden had performed his own part with as much dispatch as possible, even somehow leaving the impression that he himself did not feel very strongly about the whole thing. Henry adjusted his tie and handkerchief and looked at his watch. It was time to go.

It was only after he had rounded the corner of the annexe that he noticed that Sudden had another visitor, Barloe, the district commissioner, was talking to him. Henry checked his stride, but there was no need to turn back, for Sudden was waving a large red hand at him.

'Ah, here's Winton. You'd better tackle him yourself,' Sudden said to Barloe. 'Henry. I think you have met Mr. Barloe, the district commissioner.'

'Of course I have,' Henry said. So Sudden was his old self again, warm and expansive, radiating confidence, addressing him as Henry. 'Hullo sir,' he said to Barloe.

'Beer or gimlet?' asked Sudden.

'Beer, thank you.'

'Damian!—beer-sharap for Winton-sahib,' yelled Sudden. 'Jaldi!'

'Sir Jeffrey said you were comin' up this mornin',' said Barloe.

'Barloe wants to know if you will take on the one tusked Tista rogue,' said Sudden

Coming out suddenly like that, without any warning, the question found Henry unprepared. Did Barloe want him to take on the one tusk, or was it Sudden himself? Until he found out, it was wise to say nothing.

'They've got down to declaring him a rogue officially, at last,' explained Barloe. 'About time too. They have also—ah—doubled the reward—five hundred rupees now.'

'Here's your beer,' said Sudden. 'Cheers!'

Henry raised the heavy solid silver tankard, said 'Cheers', and took a long draught. But he did not say anything else: he did not know how Sudden wanted him to react, and he was determined not to react in any other way. He kept looking at Barloe, narrow-faced and long-nosed, the sharp, level eyes, the uncompromising firmness of mouth, the suggestion of a permanent sneer, the distilled embodiment of the British civil servant in India.

It's deuced awkward, said Barloe, nibbling delicately at a pickled onion. 'Deuced awkward!' The Tista one tusk has begun to play merry hell in the villages in the district, and the minister is makin'

ah makin' a damned nuisance of himself. Why can't we put the rogue down? Last like that. Well, it's no use even attemptin' to explain—ah—told the Indians what shootin' a rogue elephant involves! Then it went and killed a woman last week, down in Satalang—it's first kill in three months. That set up a commotion. He himself sent a note down to me. I happened to ask Sir Jeffrey if he had any suggestions. He said you might be, ah... interested. You've heard of the Tista one tusk, of course.

So there was the green light—it was Sudden himself who had said he might be interested.

'Oh, rather,' said Henry eagerly. 'And I really would like to take him on. But you know how this sort of thing would involve several days' trekking—well, at least a week at a time. And I don't know whether it would be feasible to—well, dash off on a chase like that right in the middle of the season.'

'Do you want to take him on, Henry?' asked Sudden, leaning forward in his chair. 'I mean, are you really keen? It's a dangerous business.'

'Not any more dangerous than shooting other kinds of big game. A wounded tiger, for instance, .

'Except that the elephant has brains, and uses them, and a rogue elephant is a cunning beast. But if you're really keen, then I shouldn't worry about the leave part of it. At the same time, I don't want you to take it on because ... er ... well, dammit, I don't want you to think I'm pushing you into this. It's a dangerous business, as you know. ...'

'But Winton's shot elephants before,' said Barloe. 'Two is it, or three?' he asked Henry.

'Four,' said Henry.

'Ah, but a rogue is different, they're crafty as hell. He's killed how many, three, so far - no, four including this woman.'

'If I can only get the necessary time off, Sir Jeffrey, I should be most grateful for the opportunity. Indeed, I can't think of anything I'd rather do just now than kill a rogue elephant.' Henry assured him.

'That's the spirit,' said Barloe, in his dry, crisp, slightly nasal voice. 'I knew we could depend on the planters. The next time the Tista rogue shows up anywhere I'll get them to send you a telegram.'

'And as soon as you receive the khabbar, said Sudden, 'you take off after him, without worrying about any ... time off. We won't call it leave. Duty, in fact, very much so. Only just send me a message.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Henry.

'Well, it certainly takes a weight off my mind,' said Barloe. 'The minister was beginnin' to get quite awkward. He even suggested we send word to Jim Corbett and others, you know - hunters from other provinces. That wouldn't have done at all.'

'No,' Sudden cut in. 'Not so long as you have the unfortunate planters to fall back upon, what?' But he was laughing as he said it, and it was clear that he knew Barloe well enough to chaff him. 'Well, you can depend on the planters to pick up any of your awkward jobs in the jungle, even if they do happen to be your favourite whipping boys. The Government comes screaming down on them every time there's the slightest irregularity ...'

'Now, now, Sudden,' said Barloe, his face breaking into a pleasant grin. 'You know very well how ... er ... how our hands are tied these days with our Indian ministers runnin' the Government. All of them are convinced that the planters are far too pampered. But you look after the one-tusker, Mr. Winton, and I'll straighten

out Sir Jeffrey's business of the Lamlung bridge. You'll get your bridge within a year, I promise; but of course, we can't afford to have the ministers ranged against us. You'll have to excuse me now, Sudden, I must dash off. Got to catch the express from Tinapur. Here's luck to you, Mr. Winton,' and Barloe drained his gimlet and rose to his feet.

'You do want to go after the rogue, don't you, Henry? Sudden asked, after he had seen Barloe to his car.

'I certainly do.'

I was hoping you would. Mind you I didn't want to give the impression that I was shoving you into this oh, no! That's why I got Barloe here to come and talk to you himself. But it was the sort of thing I would have longed to do myself, at your age. Also, you see, we've a whole lot of rather tricky bits of business with the Government just now. That Lamlung bridge for instance. There's a right of way involved, and unless the Government set aside the villagers' claim to compensation and gives a decision in our favour, it'll cost us thousands of rupees every year. Barloe's promised to have it all straightened out. Fine chap, Barloe, but we must stand by him as far as possible. A thing like this, this getting rid of the rogue elephant, will strengthen his hand considerably.

I only hope I can get the elephant, sir.'

'I'm pretty certain you will. There's nothing to shooting a rogue. Just a matter of guts. All you have to do is to keep your head. Matter of fact with rogue elephants as with women, one just has to learn to keep one's head. As I said, I'd have loved to take him on myself, but Kitty would have screamed her head off. I'm rather past the stage of taking off after rogue elephants, what? - chasing rogue elephants and women, both I feel it. ha, ha oh, long past Beer again? or gimlet?

'I'll stick to beer,' said Henry.

Damian! Damian! Sudden yelled. Conimene Juldi! beel-sharap for Henry sahib Juldi!

Even as Damian was pouring out Henry's beer, Sudden's steel-grey Daimler came crunching over the long, curving, black drive and stopped in the porch.

'Ah, here's Kitty and the Walters,' said Sudden.

Lady Dart, the high-priestess of Chinnar, fat and tropical and

childless, Red Cross worker and SPCA President and Chief Girl Guide rolled into one, inveterate mah-jongg player and shopper by mail, was wearing an Army and Navy Stores dress and an Army and Navy Stores hat, and looking anxiously at her husband to see what kind of mood he was in. Behind her were the Walters; first the Colonel's lady and then the Colonel himself: both tall, thin, tweedy, sola-topped; erect, steel-grey, brittle, weathered but not dried up. They looked more like brother and sister than husband and wife; so exactly like a magazine illustration of a cantonment Colonel and his memsahib, Henry thought. And some distance behind the others, carrying a strawberry-coloured sweater in one hand and a floppy grass hat in the other, and wearing a pleated, flowered, knee-length dress, came Jean Walters; slender and golden-limbed, long-legged, cherry-lipped, blue-eyed and golden-haired.

Henry caught his breath and stared at her, almost unbelievably. It was difficult to imagine anything like Jean Walters on Sudden's lawn; to connect her with a story-book Colonel and his wife; it was difficult not to go on staring at her.

Damian had pulled out more muda chairs, placing them on both sides of Sudden, and another white-coated boy came out bringing little trays of cashew-nuts and olives and pickled onions and began to mix the gimlets.

'So you're the hunter,' said Mrs. Walters after Sudden had made the introductions. 'I must say you don't look like one.'

'They don't all grow beards, y'know,' said the Colonel, 'not these days.'

'Barloe's been and gone,' Sudden told his wife. 'He's got Henry to agree to shoot his rogue elephant.'

'Don't tell me you let Mr. Barloe push you into it, Henry,' said Lady Dait.

'Oh, no,' protested Sudden with emphasis. 'It seems Henry's just dying to shoot a rogue elephant.'

'Poor rogue elephant,' said Jean Walters. 'Why does anyone have to go and kill him. Why can't he be left alone in the jungle?'

'Because he's a rogue, m'dear,' Colonel Walters explained in a very patient tone. 'The Government has . . . er, proscribed him. The DC, Mr. Barloe, has been ordered to have him destroyed.'

'Then why doesn't Mr. Barloe go and do his own killing, instead of . . . instead of bringing pressure upon other people?'

There was a noticeable break in the conversation, and then Henry

said, 'I assure you, Miss Walters, I didn't need any pressure to be brought upon me when I'm given an opportunity to kill a declared rogue.'

'I should hope not.' Sudden grunted. 'No hunter worth his salt should.'

'Think of the glamour ... the izzat, what?' said the Colonel brightly, 'if Mr. Winton should happen to kill the rogue, as I have no doubt he will. A letter of thanks from the Governor himself; perhaps an MBE.'

'And what happens if the rogue should kill Mr. Winton?' Jean asked. 'Does he get an MBE too?'

There was another awkward pause. They were all staring at Jean. She said, 'Have I said anything wrong? Have I dropped a brick?'

'You certainly have, Sudden told her. 'Hunters are superstitious about this kind of thing, I am.'

'Oh, please don't give it a thought,' Henry assured her. 'Please. I'm not in the least superstitious.'

'Nonsense! All big-game hunters are,' said Sudden. 'All. Even Jim Corbett.'

'I am sorry,' said Jean to Henry, and looked at him.

'Shall I order tiffin, dear?' Lady Dart asked her husband, obviously trying to change the conversation.

'You must be careful not to refer to it as tiffin, Kitty,' said Sudden to his wife sulkily. 'Everyone calls it "lunch". Or is it "luncheon" these days? Let's have another drink! Damian! Damian! that damned boy is forever disappearing.'

'Ah, a real Sunday tiffin; just like the old Punjab mess,' said Colonel Walters.

'Only it is not a Sunday, dear,' his wife pointed out.

'And "luncheon". Daddy, not "tiffin",' Jean reminded him.

They had grape-fruit first, and then what the Colonel called the *desi-khana*: two kinds of curry, daal, curds, papars, three kinds of pickles, and both chicken pallao and punies.

'You must use both spoon and fork,' Sudden was telling them. 'That's the correct way to eat curry and rice.'

'Of course the proper way to enjoy curry and rice is with your fingers,' said Jean. 'They say curries always taste different that way - tastier.'

'I've never tried it,' said Sudden. 'You must ask Mr. Winton. He's more likely to have tried eating curry and rice native-style. He . . . er, he seems to know so many interesting people.' He was no longer churlish, it was extraordinary how quickly he regained his inherent good humour.

'Can you Mr Winton,' Jean asked Henry.

'Hardly,' Henry said. 'I've tried, of course, once or twice when we had a *burra khana* on the garden. I'm afraid it wasn't a success.'

'Mr. Winton has tried everything,' said Sudden jovially. 'Mr. Winton believes in trying everything once even shooting elephants.'

'In the old paltan we had to tackle the *burra khana*s with our fingers,' said the Colonel reminiscently. He had a habit of injecting half-remembered Hindi words into his conversation—a habit left over no doubt from his Indian Army days.

'And does it?' asked Jean. 'I mean, does curry and rice really taste any different when eaten with your fingers?'

'Why don't you try?' Henry suggested. 'Find out for yourself. I'd like to, well, some day.'

'Don't be disgusting, my dear,' admonished her mother, making a face.

'I say, sir,' Henry said to Sir Jeffrey. 'I meant to tell you before. You know that old head watchman of yours. I saw him helping himself to a handful of your cigars.'

'What's that?' snapped Lady Dart. 'Who did you say?'

Sir Jeffrey's old watchman, John Trevor or some such.

And what did he want? Lady Dart asked her husband.

Oh, he just dropped in for a minute, said Sudden.

What was the chowkidar doing letting him come right in, muttered Lady Dart to herself.

But what? Colonel Walters put in. Bit of a badmash, what?

Neither Sir Jeffrey nor his wife took any notice of what the Colonel was saying.

'Such impudence!' said Lady Dart, addressing her husband once more. 'And what did you say he took, Henry?'

Henry must have been mistaken, dear, said Sudden placatingly.

Trevor wasn't with me for more than a few minutes. And he went straight out, I mean without going into the house. Henry must be making a mistake.

'Well, said Henry with a nervous laugh. 'I sort of got the impression, didn't actually see, of course. Could have been one of the servants, now I come to think of it.'

'That's it. Must have been one of the servants,' said Sudden eagerly. 'I shall have to go into that.'

'I must warn Damian to see that that man never steps into this bungalow again,' said Lady Dart in a querulous tone.

'I'll see to it, dear,' Sudden said. 'I'll handle this. Warn Damian about him.'

After lunch, Sir Jeffrey had taken Colonel Walters for a game of golf, he played golf regularly in spite of a slight stiffness in his left leg. Lady Dart and Mrs. Walters retired to their rooms, Henry and Jean Walters strolled back to their chairs on the lawn.

'So we are even,' Jean said to Henry as soon as they had sat down.

'Even?'

'We both dropped bricks.'

'I certainly seemed to drop a colossal one,' said Henry. 'Didn't know Lady Dart was going to feel so strongly about the man.'

'She certainly did. Did you see how Sudden was like a pricked balloon?'

'It's not a nice feeling, Miss Walters.'

'You may call me Jean,' she said. 'What were you saying?'

'I was saying that it's not a very nice feeling to have made your chief feel like a pricked balloon. Didn't know his wife would get all het up.'

'Did the man really take his cigars?'

'Of course he did. I saw him.'

'Well, what do you know. You seem to have dug out some sort of old family quarrel, some kind of skeleton.'

Henry shook his head. 'Not likely, not with people like Sudden Dart and his wife.'

'You know what I think? I think that the old watchman or whatever he is has got some sort of a hold over Sir Jeffrey, that's why Lady Dart can't stand the sight of him.'

'You certainly jump to conclusions, don't you, Miss Walters. I mean, Jean. Somewhat imaginative conclusions.'

'So he sees him only when his wife is out of the house.'

'Now what do you think of that?' said Henry laughing.

'He does too, y'know. She didn't want to go to the falls, this morning. He absolutely pushed her, the bully. . . . Did you notice how he was sulking, taking it out of her over tiffin? It was good to see him squirming for a change, oh, so meek, saying "Henry must be making a mistake, dear". And you, of course, backed him up. . . .'

'I always would. He's my chief, y'know; and he's a decent man.'

'He's everyone's chief round here, and he never lets you forget it, does he, always getting his way. What about the way he shoved you into agreeing to kill the poor elephant?'

'Well, Jean; first, he's not a poor elephant, he's already killed four people. And secondly, Sudden certainly didn't have to push me into it. I do really and truly want to try and get a shot at that elephant.'

'You may want to kill him, but you know something? You know something, mister smart-alec elephant-killer Winton? Three days ago when that man Barloe came to him to see what could be done about the elephant, Sudden promised he'd get you to go after him. It was all fixed up at the dinner table, three days ago, when they were drinking port, just the men, and we were in the sitting room, each with a game of patience. I heard Sudden confirming it just as Barloe was going away.'

'I must say I feel quite flattered that Sudden should think he can depend on me like that, that he was so sure of me. I only trust I have not spoilt that measure of confidence, making a damned nuisance of myself, making him feel small before everyone.'

'Some day,' Jean Walters said, looking directly at Henry, 'some day you will stop being a boy scout, Henry Winton, and grow up. I mean really grow up. And then mister Winton, you are going to get a nasty shock.'

'Really?'

'Really. But just now you are a nice boy scout. I didn't expect they would dig up something like you when he promised that man Barloe to get one of his managers to shoot the elephant.'

'I didn't expect anything like you here, either,' said Henry.

6

Remember Your Party Manners

IT was the president of the Highlands Club who decided when to hold the annual Chinnar Week, depending on which time was best suited to the more important among the guests invited. The 1938 Week was being held in October from the 11th to the 15th.

The Chinnar Week was the most important annual social event in the life of the upper Assam tea-planter. It was part tea-conference and part family get together, an occasion for arranging transfers, for earmarking the right men for promotion and the wrong men for retirement—it was also an occasion for pairing off some of the bachelors with the season's crop of young ladies over from England.

The five days of the week were not merely the most hectic, they were also the most important days of the year. Everyone in the tea district came with wife and children and retrievers. The Resident Directors of the three companies invited their own official and private guests. The planters and their families and their dogs stayed at the Club, either in the permanent buildings or in tents. There was little to choose between the club rooms and the tents in the way of comfort except that in the tents you had to put up with the zinc-tub and commode type of bathroom common in mofussil India. On the other hand, if you lived in the club rooms, you had to keep your dog out in the kennels. Many of the planters preferred the tents to the club rooms.

During the Week, each one of the Resident Directors gave a tea-and tennis party, with bridge and mah jongg for those who did not play tennis. The Resident Directors' wives between them organized a fancy dress party for the children complete with ice-cream and cakes from Firpo's and whistles and paper caps and presents for every child present. Every single evening there was a cocktail dance at the Club too, irrespective of whatever private entertaining was going on, and on the last day of the Week, which was invariably a Saturday, they held the annual Chinnar rough-shoot. Over the

years, the rough shoot had become a highly competitive, life- and death affair, and it was no longer possible to be casual about it. The competition was restricted to a dozen guns, four guns representing each company. It was both an individual championship and a team event. Everyone came to see the rough shoot and brought sandwiches and thermos flasks of tea or beer for lunch and walked discreetly behind the guns until the last drive of the day was over. Then they all joined in the gargantuan afternoon tea served out in the open, at which the wife of the senior Resident Director gave away the prizes.

On the same evening, after a bath and a change—the men into boiled shirts and the women into their best evening dresses—every one hurried back to the Club for the annual Chinnar rough shoot ball. By now the promotions and the transfers had been decided upon, although of course the announcements would not be made until after the end of the year: the matrimonial pairings off had been accomplished or had misfired; the rough shoot championship was won. On the last night you really got down to it and relaxed, you drank and danced, danced and drank all through the night, and later you forgathered in your own groups and sang songs and as often as not made bonfires in the Club grounds and passed round bottles of whisky in a ring a ring o' roses until you saw the day light creeping over the Himalayan peaks. You went off to sleep then, back to your rooms and tents and as soon as you were awake and recovered you got into your cars and left for your gardens feeling a little sad and deflated.

In between the round of communal festivities, you squeezed in an equally heavy schedule of private entertaining: lunch or dinner parties with other planters, picnics, fishing or boating trips on the lake: you could even go for a quiet walk in the morning or get a hard game of squash with the club marker to sweat out the ravages of excessive smoking and drinking.

Sitting in the men's dressing room of the Highlands Club, dressed in a shirt of towelling and white shorts, and waiting for one of the three club showers to be free, Henry Winton was humming and whistling to himself a tune which he had heard since coming up to Chinnar. It was an Eddie Cantor song called 'Look what you've done'. He had just played seven games of squash with Babulal the marker and had managed to win three of them, and

since the Highlands Club marker was the third ranked professional squash player in the whole of India, Henry was pleased with his own showing against him. If sahib only practises regularly, he would beat Murad,' the marker had assured him.

Henry had other reasons to feel pleased with himself besides his game of squash with Babulal. He had been told by Sudden that he was one of the four guns chosen to represent the Brindian team in the rough shoot. Although Henry was regarded as one of the best men with the heavy rifle in the district, no one had thought as well of his shotgun shooting as of that of Sudden himself. For instance, or Bliss or Cherrill or some of the others, not to be sure, had Henry himself thought that he was yet in the championship class. For competitive shotgun shooting you needed constant practice, you had to fire off several thousand rounds even before the shooting season opened each year just to get your eye in, and that sort of practice was beyond a junior manager's means. Sudden could easily have chosen someone else for his fourth gun, and Henry was aware that he was being specially favoured.

But the chief reason for Henry's abounding high spirits was an experience of the previous evening. It had come like a flash of lightning, a sudden explosion sparking a longing which had not been there before, tender yet burning and overwhelming. While he and Jean had been strolling on the moonlit lawn after they had returned from the dance at the club, he had attempted to kiss her. It was a hesitant, even half-hearted sort of kiss when it began, but Jean had taken it over from him and transformed it into a lingering, searing moment of bliss, coming from nowhere, it had become an exploration into forbidden territory, a kiss of hunger and thirst and desire, an unmistakable preliminary to higher rewards.

Had her parents really brought her to India to get married? If so, he, Henry, would take good care to remain handy.

The Colonel and his lady, too, had improved on closer acquaintance and now seemed less brittle and artificial. Henry could even picture them as allies. Even as it was, he was beginning to wonder whether they were not purposely leaving Jean and himself more and more together. He certainly hoped they were. Just how much they were co-operating, perhaps he would know for certain in the evening, when they were all to visit the game cottage. Sudden had reserved the cottage for the Walters family, and had asked Henry to be their guide. The visit to the game cottage had nearly fallen

through, because the Colonel had thought his wife would not be able to manage the ladders.

'I don't think Elsie should go climbing ladders,' he had said at lunch. 'Nor should I, for that matter.'

'But it's absurdly easy,' Sudden had assured him. 'I even took up old dowager Lady Haverell.'

'Well, how high up is this cottage, exactly?' asked Elsie Walters.

'Exactly thirty feet. We had to have it that high because of the danger of elephants, you know.'

'And how does one go up, Sudden?'

'Well, at first there is a short rope-ladder, just ten feet high. It takes you to a platform, complete with railing. From there you get on to another ladder; a longer one this time, full fifteen feet, but it is a nice teakwood one and placed at a comfortable incline. This second ladder takes you to the fork of the tree. We have another platform there. After that there is a proper staircase, taking you another five feet, right into the verandah of the cottage.'

'Well, that sounds a bit of theek-hai,' said the Colonel.

'It's perfectly easy,' Sudden had insisted. 'Dammit, the cottage is our show piece here, and we have made it all easy as pie. Of course, we have to go up the two ladders and the staircase—but that was all designed to provide the best observation . . . combined with safety.'

'Do you think Elsie would be able to manage it, Kitty?' the Colonel had asked Lady Jeffrey.

'Oh, yes,' she had assured him. 'Nothing to it. And of course Henry will help you up.'

'Yes, of course,' Henry had said.

'Oh, do let's go, Daddy,' Jean had implored.

'Of course we're going, dear,' her mother had said, and that had clinched the matter.

It was all fixed now, and Henry was looking forward to the evening in the game cottage with trembling anticipation; the situation, as he saw it, had immense possibilities, from the way the cards seemed to be falling.

It was a rosy, fragrant world; and it was wonderful to be alive in it; alive and pleasantly tired after the all-out game of squash with the Club pro., waiting for a tingling shower, first the hot and then the cold, and then changing into a silk shirt and tweeds.

'Look what you've done,' Henry was crooning to himself, and

trying to re-capture some of the wonder and excitement of the previous evening when he had held Jean in his arms, ardent and demanding.

Within an hour, there would be tea on the glazed verandah of Sudden's bungalow overlooking the lake; an elaborate, English tea served in the Company's own ornate solid-silver tea service with the Brindian crest on it. There would be scones, light and piping hot, with honey and butter, and chocolate cake, and pâté and chutney sandwiches; there would be Jean, lovely, completely a part of the daily ritual of an English tea, deceptively demure on the surface, delightfully volatile underneath. . . .

The door of one of the three showers opened and Cockburn draped in a towel, stepped out; he looked dishevelled and red-eyed.

'No good,' Cockburn pronounced. 'Cold shower no bloody good for a hangover.'

'I'm sorry,' said Henry.

'Ah, Winton!—some hair of the dog; that's the answer. Will you join me?' Cockburn slumped down on the cane-seated bench beside Henry.

'I've been waiting for a shower,' said Henry by way of excuse. 'Don't want to cool off after squash. Took three games off Babulal.'

'Babulal always lets everyone take two or three games off him,' Cockburn said. 'Just to boost their ego. Always has done it, the old rogue.'

'No, he plays all out with me,' said Henry confidently.

'Then you must be very good. Now don't go and tell me you played squash for Eton.'

'No. Not Eton.'

'In that case I don't suppose Babulal can afford to fool around, giving you points. Boy! Boy! Bring me a chota-peg, please; juldi!' he yelled. 'Sure you won't change your mind?'

'Here?' Henry asked. 'In the dressing-room?'

'A chota-peg is the same wherever you drink it, Winton,' said Cockburn with mock-seriousness. 'Juldi, boy!'

'Well, I'll change my mind,' said Henry, suddenly attracted by the idea of ordering a whisky-and-soda in the men's dressing-room at three o'clock in the afternoon.

'Good! B O Y !—bring two chota-pegs, ekdum,' yelled Cockburn.

'Did you ever come across a man called Trevor?' asked Henry.

'Head watchman or something on one of the gardens; the hockey chap's father.'

'Trevor? Very familiar name. Let me see. Oh, yes, that's right; used to be head watchman at Pagoda Dale. Funny little Japanesy looking man.'

'That's him.'

'Harmless little chap. The only thing I seem to remember about him, funnily enough—or perhaps not so funnily, ha, ha—is his wife. Extraordinarily good-looking woman. Oh, yes! Little odd, that, now I come to think of it, how anyone . . . well . . . anyone as insignificant as John Trevor should have married to a woman like that. But you know how it is, in India. The women don't get a chance to see their husbands—oh, what am I saying—I mean before marriage. . . . They just have to marry anyone their parents tell them to, just anyone. Where did you run into him?'

'Here in Chinnar. He had come to see Sir Jeffrey.'

'Oh. You know how all these old servants of the company are forever going to Sudden asking for some kind of help. Sudden, of all people! Can you imagine his going out of his way to help anyone all played-out like that? Wrong man to go to asking for help, what? Tell me, how are you making out? Why were you singled out; anything special in the offing.'

Henry suddenly thought of Jean and tried to parry Cockburn's question. How much did he know? 'Oh, no, sir,' he said smiling. 'What about yourself? When are they bringing you up here?—to the head office?'

Cockburn sat up with a jerk and looked at Henry as though he had said something offensive; the lines round his pale blue eyes hardened, and there were patches of white on his tanned, leathery face. 'Are you being a son of a bitch, Winton, or are you just a babe in arms?' he asked very coldly, as though he expected a positive answer to the question. 'Are you pulling my leg or are you . . .? Christ! Don't you know anything yet? How things run here?'

'I'm sorry. I certainly wasn't pulling your leg, sir.'

'Didn't you know they've already cooked my goose?—Sudden and the other bastards. They're sending me back as soon as they get the new year's crop of Oxford boys. . . .'

'I'm sorry. . . .'

'It's your sort of bastard they want, sweet-smelling, squash-playing boys shining with vitamins and virtue whom they can

push around like a pack of office boys. They have no use for real, rum-soaked planters of the old school like myself. They are all bastards at the head office, and that white-bellied slug Sudden Death is the worst of the lot. Did you know he was two years junior to me? . . . to both myself and Wallach?—and that in his probation year it was I who had to write his confidential report?

He could see that Cockburn had been drinking too much and, was letting off steam. 'I didn't know that,' said Henry, feeling uncomfortable and hoping that the boy wouldn't come in with their drinks just when Cockburn was saying something outrageous about Sudden. You never knew with these English-speaking Club boys. They might very well run to Sudden telling him what they had heard. After all, Sudden was the president of the Highlands Club, the burra-sahib of all the burra-sahibs.

'Then what happened?' he asked Cockburn.

'What happened! The war happened, that's all; a bloody world war! Wallach and myself and a dozen others went off and got killed or wounded or shell-shocked or broken-up in some other way. But not Sudden Dart: oh, no.'

'Poor Sudden has a stiff knee,' said Henry. 'A riding accident the very first year he was here. Everyone knows that. He's always regretted that he couldn't get into the war.'

'Bad knee and a lily liver. . . . Ah, here's the boy with our chota-pegs.'

'Leave the tray on the bench, boy,' said Henry to the boy, 'and bring two more chota pegs in ten minutes—exactly ten minutes.' He was hoping Cockburn wouldn't say anything offensive about Sudden in the boy's hearing.

'He got rid of Wallach five years ago when your batch came, and now it's going to be my turn. . . .'

'You can't blame Sudden for sending Wallach home, y'know. Wallach had certainly run to seed,' Henry protested.

'Well, so have I, Winton; so have I. You don't have to be polite. Keep your party manners for Sudden and his like, m'boy. Yes, Wallach and the rest of us who got involved in the war got broken up, and we all went to seed. We went and fought on the Somme, and we got shot up and gassed by the Germans, and we went to seed. Dammit! Of course we all went to seed.' Cockburn laughed hoarsely. 'That's the thing to do, Winton, take it from me; don't get involved in any rough-and-tumble. I advise you as one who

has . . . who has thoroughly gone to seed that if there's any kind of rumpus with this chap Mussolini or Hitler, you keep out of it. Take my tip. Try and acquire a nice game leg, now, so that when the time comes, you won't have to go. And then you won't go to seed, Winton.'

'I know it's unfortunate, sir,' said Henry. 'But poor Sudden has got to account for things to the London office. It's they who lay down the policy. . . .'

'Poor Sudden! Ha, ha, poor Sudden! Let me tell you, Winton, you can keep your poor, misunderstood, straight-laced glamour-boys like Sudden. One Wallach is worth a hundred of them, as far as I am concerned . . . a hundred. Do you know how Wallach won his D.S.O.?'

'I've never been really interested.'

'Then you don't need to know. But let me tell you one thing. When it comes to a showdown with this man Hitler, it's chaps like Wallach who will be sent to die in Europe, and it's chaps like Sudden who'll be staying here, looking after tea and helling around with the women; and prospering and not going to seed and getting their knighthoods from the King. . . .'

'I do think you're hardly being fair to Sudden, Captain Cockburn,' said Henry. 'He has to run twenty-seven tea gardens. He can't afford to carry lame ducks.'

'All right, Winton, don't let's talk about bastards like Sudden, and dead-beats like myself. Let's put on our old school ties and pretend we're Kipling boys running the Empire. Don't let's speak of unpleasant things about the last war or the horrors of the coming war. Let's forget all the messes we're heading for and talk about the up-and-coming boys like yourself, guaranteed not to soil their hands with anything dirty, guaranteed not to run to seed. Tell me, was that you I heard whistling before I came out?'

'Yes.'

'Ah! And does that mean you're making headway with that girl I saw you with? —the Colonel's daughter?'

'I don't know.'

'Why don't you take her out a little more, for drives and things, or boating? Boating would seem to be the ideal kind of setting . . . or get her to go to the game cottage with you. . . .'

'I'm taking her there to-night,' said Henry, 'the whole family.'

'Ah,' said Cockburn with a grin. 'I thought there was a catch.'

Well, I wish you luck. Personally, I should have thought that a girl as attractive as she is is definitely not being, well, trotted out . . . Y'know what I mean.'

'Yes, she's terribly attractive.'

'You got my point; obviously you weren't being singled out for special treatment, to get you two paired off.'

'No. It was a rogue elephant. Sudden wants me to go after the Tista one-tusker. Of course, I'm terribly keen myself to shoot him.'

'Oh, I see. So it's just a happy coincidence that Miss . . . er, Miss Walters happens to be here. . . .'

'As you say, a very happy coincidence.'

'Humm. She's no despairing maiden. what? She can pick and choose as she likes. I wish you all the luck, of course, Winton; but don't take it too much to heart if you don't get anywhere. Personally, I don't think she's the sort of girl who would choose to spend the rest of her life here as a planter's memsahib, what?'

'There's that, of course.'

'Keep trying, m'boy. There's nothing like trying. But I very much doubt if Miss Walters is the kind of filly who can be tethered to a stall in upper Assam. . . . How long are they staying here?'

'They're leaving by the next but one P. and O.; booked from Bombay.'

'You'll have to be nippy, then. . . . Here's the boy with the life-savers.'

7

No Place for Failures

HENRY had never been particularly friendly with Cockburn, and yet the thought that Cockburn was being retired was vaguely disturbing. He tried to console himself with the thought that if Cockburn was going back, it meant only that the London office had decided to extend Sudden's tenure as the Resident Director by another three years; and it was good to know that Sudden was staying on. There was no doubt that of the two, he himself would always have chosen Sudden. You could not visualize anyone like Cockburn taking over as the RD after you had been used to a man like Sudden Dart.

All the same, as Henry walked back from the Club along the sweep of the lake sparkling in the afternoon sunlight, heading for the Resident Director's bungalow and an English tea, he caught himself wishing that Cockburn wasn't going back. It was always sad to think of someone going back after all those years of service in India—particularly of someone going back as a failure.

And yet it was difficult to think of Cockburn as a failure, for as a planter he was, surprisingly, an unqualified success; hard-drinking free-spending, outspoken Cockburn whose yields were always among the highest and whose plantation coolies were said to worship his photograph in their houses along with their heathen gods and goddesses. He was being sent back because he was a misfit. For a man of his seniority, they had no suitable pigeon-hole in the organization; either they would have to make him Resident Director after Sir Jeffrey Dart, or retire him. . . . It was a choice between promotion and the sack. The pity of it was that Cockburn himself had wanted neither. What he wanted above all was to go on being manager at Lamlung; remote, inaccessible Lamlung; he wanted to go on being manager there until he died.

No; as a tea-planter Cockburn certainly wasn't a failure. He was being sent back because he was the odd piece thrown out by the screening machinery; the man in the wrong age group and seniority

in the assembly-line of corporation employees. It was Wallach who had been sent back because he could not make the grade, Henry reminded himself; Wallach whose garden had gone to pot; Wallach, with his shell-torn, useless arm and his frayed D.S.O. ribbon, who had been his predecessor at Silent Hill—too much whisky, too many women; Wallach who was slowly going Bolshy.

They had had the same Resident Director, of course, five years ago, but he had been plain Mr. Dart then; the knighthood had not come until the Birthday Honours of 1935. At that time, too, he was the most junior of the three Resident Directors at Chinnar; but he was, even then, the most forceful personality Henry had encountered in his twenty-five years.

'Wallach,' Sudden Dart had told Henry Winton when he had gone to report to him at Chinnar on his first arrival, 'is a failure. He's gone to seed; his garden's gone to seed. This is no place for failures. I want you to bear that in mind, Winton.'

And Henry Winton had winced and tried to keep a straight face, and to meet the hard gaze of those level, steel-blue eyes without flinching; hoping that Sudden would not be able to fathom the barely suppressed awareness of inadequacy within himself, nor scent out the constant, deep-seated fear of failure.

For he, Henry Winton, he too had been a failure, now desperately trying to repair the ravages ten thousand miles away from the scene of his rout, determined to make a success of himself at all costs, living up to an altogether new sense of values aimed exclusively at success.

Henry Winton's failure may have been a different kind of failure, but it was a failure all the same, and it was just as complete a failure as Wallach's. It was not the result of inefficiency or sloth or dishonesty, nor, thank God, of the degeneration of drink or dope or anything like that. It was just that the qualities that had been so carefully bred into him had not served him in his particular environments.

Henry Winton had played rugger for his school, and had one day hoped to play rugger for Oxford. But in 1929, Henry's last year at school, his father had died; the small, carefully built-up, century-old family business of exporting coarse, highly coloured cotton cloth to South Africa and Kenya had been wiped out almost overnight. After the smoke had cleared and the creditors had gone away, clicking their tongues and shaking their heads, after the

furniture had been auctioned, the house sold, and his mother had moved into two dingy rooms, there was no longer any question of Henry's going up to Oxford. He had to find a job.

The job they found for him was not bad: for thirty shillings a week and a generous commission on sales, he worked as a salesman in a firm of second-hand motor-car dealers. As Henry saw it, the used car business was a colossal racket where the size of the profits depended to a large extent on the gullibility of the customer and a number of little and big near-friends to boost a car's performance during the trial, and above all on sales talk that was a naked insult to his upbringing and education. At the end of a year, he had left the job in disgust and set up a used-car business of his own operated on clean lines. He had invested all his savings in the venture, and every penny he could raise by borrowing from his mother and other relatives. Two years later the world slump had reached England, and the business folded. By that time, of course, he had been able to pin down the causes of his failure: by temperament and upbringing, he was not suited to the rough-and-tumble world of business; his public school education had not prepared him for the world of commerce in the cut-throat days of the great depression. But it was already too late. The creditors had come again, chauffeur-driven in sleek black cars, taken over his stock, appointed their own manager and men, and had magnanimously agreed to waive all further claims. £

He realized, of course, that his failure as a dealer in used cars was a failure of St. Bede's and Mill Hill; it was a failure of the Old School tie and Kipling's 'If'; a failure of middle-class rectitude. He was twenty-four years old, broke but wiser, tougher, more practical.

For the next few months, he had taken on whatever work had come his way, and for an agonizing five weeks he had acted as a tout and general errand man for a street bookie. They were crucial, all important weeks, for it was during those weeks that Henry Winton had discovered that it was dead easy to make a living if you eased up on your sense of values, learned to regard the tenets of the boyhood code as only a kind of snobbishness—even if you had to get used to a permanent bad taste in your mouth.

He was lucky to be away on his rounds when the shop was raided; he was even luckier to have in his pocket thirty-three

pounds of the firm's money which he had just collected from an unsuccessful client.

He had been lying low, keeping away from his racing circles, when his mother had sent him a cutting from the 'Situations Vacant' column of *The Times*. The qualifications stipulated had almost made Henry laugh, for they were the very qualifications that he himself had decided were totally out of place in the hard world of business.

What they wanted was a public school man, not too young but unmannered, who would be prepared to go to India at short notice. Henry had sent off an application almost as a lark, and he was quite surprised when they had called him up for an interview. He had put on his old school tie and gone to the London office of the Hindian Tea Company, and as soon as they had discovered that he had played rugger for his school they had stopped asking him any further questions. They had sent him off to Calcutta, first class all the way, and from Calcutta he had been sent 'on probation' for a course of training on one of the Company's tea-gardens in Bengal. But even before his six months of probation were over, he had been transferred to North-Western Assam and told to report to the Resident Director at Chinnar.

It seemed that they had to find a replacement in a hurry for a man called Wallach. It seemed that they were getting rid of Wallach because he had been a failure. For Henry Winton, it had been a sobering thought.

8

And then there was Darkness

T H E R E were two moons, and they were both full; one, cold and lustreless and hidden behind the trees, the other, an enormous, sickly yellow orb which had just been switched on by Henry Winton, and which threw a diffused, synthetic glow over the salt-lick.

From their slatted wooden bench on the verandah of the game cottage, Henry Winton and the Walters family peered into the dimly lit patch below. They were all huddled round Henry, asking him questions, and they were talking in whispers because they did not want to disturb the herd of bison on the salt-lick below them, and also because they were excited. The great, dark brown beasts were completely in the open, white-legged and green-eyed.

'How old is the calf, do you think?' asked Mrs. Walters.

'About three months.'

'Oh, just a bachha, what?' said the Colonel. 'Which of the two bulls would you take, Henry, if you were shooting?'

'The one on the right; magnificent animal. Look at the spread close on forty, I should think. Horns blunt with age, and splintered too, I bet.'

'Don't they fight,' asked Jean, 'two big bulls in the same herd?'

'Three,' said Henry. 'That one's a bull too, behind mamma and the little one. No, they don't fight except during the mating season; around April and May. Then the big one will drive the other two away.'

'Look!' said Jean. 'The big one is looking at us.'

'He's certainly acting as though he were suspicious,' said Henry.

The big bull had put his head up and his great eyes shone green in the glare of the artificial moon. He went on staring into the tree for a long time, flicking his ears, while they all held their breath.

'Don't they ever blink their eyes?' asked Mrs. Walters.

'Don't seem to, what,' said her husband.

'The old boy's caught some scent,' said Henry. 'He's certainly acting as though he's suspicious; but not of us.'

'Oh, look!— the little one. He's trying to suck,' said Jean, putting her hand on Henry's arm.

'How sweet,' said her mother. 'I do wish I could photograph them.'

'The old boy's still quite jittery, though,' remarked Henry.

What do you think's worrying him?' asked the Colonel.

'Some other animal probably.'

Oh, look at the baby and the mother, said Jean. 'Just look.'

'Sweet,' said Mrs Walters. 'Sweet.'

'The big one doesn't like it here, he's going to hustle them away any minute now,' said Henry.

'Oh, no,' said Jean. 'Oh, no!'

'He's certainly acting damned queer. Notice how he hasn't had a single go at the lick—he doesn't like it at all.'

'Where exactly would you shoot him?' asked the Colonel.

Oh, from here it's an awkward shot. Just behind the neck would be best, that should find his heart, way down. But you never find them in this position when you are out shooting, craning their necks to look up at you. The usual shot is the side shot; and then you'd aim just behind the shoulder blade—again fairly low.'

And what sort of bore?

Nothing smaller than a three-seventy-five, Magnum, that is . . . They take a lot of killing. I use a four-sixty-five myself; same for elephants and bison. And solids too, for both. Ooops!— they are all cocking their heads now. Scared.'

Of what do you think?' asked Mrs Walters.

'Some other animal, something they don't care for. Maybe something stalking them.'

'Tiger' asked Jean. She still had her hand on Henry's arm.

'Could be more likely a leopard, or even wild dogs. With that little one there they don't like it.'

'Oh, the poor thing,' said Jean. 'The little one has been shoved away, oh how cruel!'

Yes, even Mamma has caught the scent now. Any moment . . . Ah, they're off!

The big bison gave a snort and jerked his head, and all the others took alarm and twisted their bodies and threw their heads up and fled crashing into the jungle. They could be heard for quite some time, but the salt-lick was empty, just a dimly lit patch in the dark forest.

An hour had passed and the excitement had died down. The bison had not come back, nor was there any sign of any other animals.

'Queer,' said Henry, 'damned queer.'

'Let's have dinner,' suggested the Colonel. 'Shall we have khana, dear?'

'It's hardly dinner time; only just past eight.'

'Good idea,' said Henry. 'We seem to have struck a bad day.'

'There's sliced ham and tongue, and hard boiled eggs, and rolls, and a salad; and a chocolate cake and apples too,' said Mrs. Walters smiling, 'and two thermoses of coffee.'

'Coffee!—Good-oh!' said the Colonel. 'I expect Sudden'll throw a fit.'

'I've always felt a little disloyal myself whenever I drink coffee,' said Henry.

'I could eat a horse,' said Jean.

'Amazing how hungry one feels, just waiting for game,' said Henry. 'It's the excitement, of course.'

The electric moon threw a dim, indirect glow in the verandah. They ate their dinner in silence and drank their coffee.

'Pity we can't smoke,' said the Colonel. 'I'm dying for a cigarette.'

'Of course you can smoke,' said Henry. 'The no-smoking rule applies only from March to May, for obvious reasons; then even a small spark could burn down the works.'

'Sure I may smoke?' asked the Colonel, sounding very relieved.

'Of course you can; the jungle's quite damp.'

'Then why don't you smoke yourself, Henry?' asked Jean.

'I try to discipline myself,' said Henry. 'I'm dying for a cigarette too, but I give up smoking every time I go out shooting, or on anything like this. An elephant can detect cigarette smoke hundreds of yards away; if the wind is right, of course; and he connects it with fire. He doesn't know it's just your cigarette.'

'Sure you wouldn't care for one?' asked Mrs. Walters.

'No thank you.'

Colonel Walters lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. After a little while, he leaned back and stretched out his legs.

'Do you think anything else will turn up?' asked Mrs. Walters.

'It's difficult to say,' said Henry. 'You see, the best time is between dusk and nine o'clock. That's the feeding time. After that, they are inclined to lie up.'

'I think I'm going to turn in,' said the Colonel, yawning. 'The little bed in there looks a bit of teek-hai, what. And I expect I'll be turned out of it whenever both the ladies take it into their heads to retire.'

'Are you going to stop up all night?' Mrs. Walters asked Henry.

'I expect I'll stretch out on the bench later, I'm quite used to this sort of thing.'

'Will you promise to wake me up if anything exciting turns up, anything at all?'

'Of course,' said Henry, trying to sound casual 'Of course'

'Then I'm going to go and rest too, before Wally grabs the better bed. Come in as soon as you feel sleepy, Jean,' said Mrs. Walters

'Yes, Mamma,' answered Jean. 'But I want to stay up for some time'

'Good night,' said Mrs. Walters

The Colonel finished his cigarette, put it out carefully, making something of a show of it and holding out the dead stub for Henry's inspection. 'Good night, you two, call me if something does show up'

At last they were alone. They sat in the cold, silent night, talking in whispers and clutching each other's hand tightly, and Henry's heart kept doing somersaults whenever there was a noise in the jungle

'Do you really think we'll see anything?' asked Jean

'I don't know. I hope so'

'I don't mind,' said Jean. 'I don't mind at all'

'Are you feeling sleepy?'

'No, are you?'

'I'm used to this sort of thing waking up for game except . . .'

'Except what?' whispered Jean, and her face was almost touching his. 'Except what?'

Henry's lips felt dry. 'Except that I haven't always the loveliest girl in the world sitting next to me holding hands'

'Do you like it?'

'Ye-es'

'Would you like to kiss me?'

'Ye-ess'

'Why don't you?'

He could feel her breath warm and fragrant, and her face, pale

and more beautiful than ever in the soft side-glow of their artificial moon, was within inches of his own. He looked into her eyes, shining with eagerness, her mouth, half-open and inviting. He was wantonly delaying the moment, savouring its pleasure.

There was a slight noise below them, like a leaf falling, and Henry drew back with a start and looked down.

'What's that?' asked Jean.

'Can't say, something small; can you see it?'

'Oh, yes; what is it?'

'A mouse deer, I think—Damn!'

'Why "damn"?'

'I hoped it was going to be something—something much bigger; for you.'

'I don't mind,' she said, and again pressed his arm.

Thirty feet below them, the mouse deer rubbed his nose into the earth and sniffed and shook his head with delight, scurrying about on his ridiculous little legs and sampling the salt-lick mixture at different places, and then, when he came close to the dense bushes at the right edge of the patch, he stopped abruptly, jumped high in the air, and bolted away.

'Did you notice that?' Henry whispered.

'What?'

'The way that mouse deer jumped away from the bush.'

'Yes what does that mean?'

'There's something hiding behind that bush.'

'What do you think?—leopard or something?'

'No; a tiger.'

'A tiger?'

'Yes; I'm pretty sure that's what our bison must have been scared of. Besides, if it had been a leopard, it would have pounced on the mouse deer.'

'A tiger wouldn't?'

'No; a tiger waits for big game.'

'Can you see him?'

'I am trying to. They sit absolutely stock-still. God!—I wouldn't swear to it, but I think I can see the stripes just behind that—Can you see that whitish triangular patch. . . . Ah, now did you see? He moved just then.'

'No, I can't see anything. What's he waiting there for?'

'For something to turn up. Waiting to make a kill. By Jove!—

it promises to be exciting. As soon as something turns up on the salt-lick, we'll see the tiger dashing out and making a kill.'

'Really?'

'Yes. My word!—that's the sort of thing they lay on for the Governor! Shall I go and wake up the Colonel?'

'Must you?'

'Oh, I'm pretty sure we'll see something exciting. Even if he doesn't make his kill, we'll at least see him coming out of that bush to attack.'

'Must you?' asked Jean, leaning towards him and bringing her face very close to him.

'No; I suppose not.'

'Kiss me.'

Henry kissed her. He had known what to expect, and yet it had made him gasp. He felt almost embarrassed by its lingering, searching intimacy. And then he had realized that a woman did not put so much of herself into a kiss unless she was inviting you to go further. He leaned over, forcing her shoulders back.

But she pushed him away, gently yet firmly. 'That's quite enough for a start,' she said. She was sitting very primly now, not cuddling up to him any more.

'Have you got a handkerchief?' she asked.

'Here.'

'Is my lipstick badly smeared?'

'No.'

'There is a bit on your lip, no, higher up. Here, let me do it for you. That's it. It's very exciting, isn't it?'

'It is.'

'Do you know, I've never before been kissed within a few feet of a tiger waiting to make a kill.'

'Shall we wake the Colonel up?'

'No.'

'It's a chance of a lifetime; to see a tiger making a kill.'

'No.'

'All right; but please hold my hand; you're too far away.' Jean slid closer to him and sat leaning against him once more, holding his hand.

They were sitting very still now, and both upright, a half-hour or so later, for they had both heard a noise in the jungle on their left;

at first a faint crack, like a twig breaking in the distance, and then a steady rustle. It was obvious that some animal was coming up to the salt-lick.

'Now,' said Henry.

'What is it, do you think?'

'Something pretty big by the sound of it. . . . Wait, there are two of them.'

'Won't they get the scent of the tiger?'

'No, he's sitting down-wind. By Jove!—This is going to be interesting!'

Henry was right. There were two animals; a male and a female sambhar. They came on unsuspectingly, for the faint wind was blowing from them to the waiting tiger. They came out into the circle of light like a pair of stage stars stepping towards the foot-lights, as though conscious of their grace and beauty. The deep-chested male with his huge head and arrogant, spreading antlers, and his trim, frisky young wife-of-the-moment were a perfectly matched pair.

'I wonder which one he will take,' said Henry.

'Oh, no!' protested Jean, clutching his wrist tightly. 'Oh, no!'

'Shush! Mustn't make a noise here.'

'Please stop it, Henry. Please!'

'You can't stop it. One of them has to die. The doe, I should think; because I don't think the tiger would want to take on anything with those antlers. My God!—he's magnificent.'

'It's shameful,' said Jean, 'horrible!'

Unsuspecting, the big buck and his lady were high-stepping into the arena of death, getting closer and closer to the dark clump of bushes on the right, and Henry noticed a slight stirring in the foliage.

'Did you see that?' he asked. 'That was the twitching of the tail.'

'Oh, no,' protested Jean. 'Oh, no!' She was whispering no longer, but almost shouting. 'Run away, you fools! Go away! Go away!'

'Please,' said Henry. 'You mustn't disturb the game here. They'll stop coming to the game cottage if they are disturbed. Sudden'll be furious.'

The pair of sambhars had stopped in their tracks, holding their heads high as though posing for a photograph except that they were both flicking their ears wildly to detect where the sounds were

coming from. In the light of the electric moon, their eyes glowed like green embers.

'Oh, how can you, Henry?' Jean screamed at him. 'Do something quick!' She picked up a cushion from the bench and hurled it at the sambhars, yelling, 'Go away, you fools! Get out of there!'

'What is it? What is it, dear?' Colonel Walters was saying behind them, and close behind him was Mrs. Walters. They came into the verandah and the Colonel put his hands on his daughter's shoulders and asked, 'What is the matter?'

They were just in time. They all saw the yellow flash below them as the tiger broke from behind his cover, making a grunting, coughing sound, like that of a blunt saw on hard wood.

'Oh, do something, Henry! Please, please!' Jean cried out. 'Oh, no! I can't bear it!'

It was the doe he chose: young and fresh and frisky. She gave a terrified honk as he felled her, biting viciously into her throat, his deadly jaws crunching into the neck, his paws holding down like a vice the wild, thrashing of her limbs, cutting angry, red-spurting gashes into her beautiful white belly.

'I hate you!' screamed Jean. 'Oh I hate you, Henry.'

Then there was darkness. Henry Winton had switched off the artificial moon.

9

Here's to the Proprieties!

BLISS, of the Gilmour Tea Company, won the rough shoot cup, having shot sixty-eight assorted birds and six hares. Sudden was a close second, his bag just seven short of Bliss's, who's third win in succession it was. It was the first time Sudden had come so close to winning the Chinnar rough shoot.

Henry Winton, nearly always having to take the more difficult butts, knew that his score would not be very high. The butts for the different teams were decided by draw so that each Captain could place his guns according to his choice. There was no doubt left in Henry's mind that Sudden was making a determined bid for the individual championship that day, and he wished him all luck. If anyone deserved to win the rough shoot championship, it was Sir Jeffrey Dart, considering the practice he put in every year in and out of season. All the same, Henry could not help feeling that towards the end of the day, when Sir Jeffrey must have become tired, either Cotton or himself would have fared better if they had been given some of the butts that had accounted for record bags in the past years, so that as a team they would have won the championship for Brindian. As it was, even the team event had been won by Gilmour.

Henry could sympathize with Sudden; he did try so hard, and it was almost unfair that he should have lost by so small a margin. At the same time, he could not put away the slightly disloyal thought that the Brindian team could have won the team event if Sudden had not always kept the best shooting positions for himself.

The biggest bags always fell to those who had the forward butts. On the rearward butts, the birds usually came high, and they came scattered and flying fast because they had been already shot at by the front guns. You had to pick out each bird then; there was no question of firing off both barrels into a thick covey and hoping for the best. Even so, Sudden had had something of a windfall that day when he brought down eleven birds with a right-and-left, and

at one time he was leading Bliss. But in the afternoon he had begun to tire and had made an indifferent showing on some of the most prized butts.

The Brindian team had come second, exactly a dozen birds behind Gilmour.

Bliss was the hero of the day, and next week it would be his name that would go up once again on the teakwood board in the Highlands Club entrance hall; Peter Bliss who would be toasted in champagne that evening, poured out in the enormous rough shoot cup; Bliss, fair-haired and slight and tall and twenty-seven—his photograph would appear in the *Tatler* and the *Field*.

It was Bliss, too, who took Jean Walters to the Chinnar Week dance that evening, Jean who was wearing a shimmering white dress and gold shoes to match her gold hair, and looking pale and severe and implausibly beautiful—Jean who had turned down Henry's proposal of marriage that very morning.

They had climbed the hill behind the house, and they had just witnessed the breath-taking spectacle of a winter sunrise in the Himalayas. They had watched in silence, shivering slightly because of their nervousness and also because of the cold, early morning wind, and neither of them had spoken for a long time. Then Jean had said, 'Oh, it's not true.' She was still looking into the distance and her words were barely audible. 'It is so beautiful it . . . makes you want to cry.'

Henry held her arms gently and turned her face towards him. 'Will you marry me?' he asked.

She did not say anything for a long time, so that he had to ask his question again. 'Will you?'

'I was hoping you weren't going to ask me, Henry,' she said. 'And yet, I knew you were.'

'I love you,' he said. Her hands felt cold and damp in his.

She shook her head. 'I wish I knew what to say. It's so, so bewildering. That's why I was hoping you wouldn't ask me—at least not now—knowing that it would only make you despise me ever afterwards.'

'I love you; nothing can make me despise you.'

'But I cannot give you an answer. There is someone . . . someone . . .'

'Someone you love?'

She turned her face and gazed wide-eyed at the Himalayas. 'Yes, Henry. And yet . . . I wanted you to say what you have just said. But I know it was wrong to . . . to go on as I did.'

'Is it because you don't want to spend your life in this . . . wilderness?'

Jean shook her head. 'No, I've nothing against this life.'

He put his arms round her and crushed her close to him. 'You haven't said "yes" or "no";' he said. 'Or is it "no"?'

'You're hurting me Henry. Please. I don't know myself. I wish I knew. Try to understand me. It is not fair to press me for an answer. . . .'

Henry released his hold rather suddenly, and she had to move back a step to get her balance. And then, almost perversely, he seized her again and kissed her full on the mouth.

'Oh, leave me, leave me alone!' Jean said with sudden anger, and pushed him away with all her strength. As soon as she was free, she turned and ran down the hill path.

Henry had found Cockburn where he had expected him to be. He was sitting in front of the fire in the men's bar, and he was all by himself. He peered hard at Henry for a moment, as though annoyed at being interrupted. Then he said, 'Come and have a drink, Winton. And please shut the door; I can't bear the damned music!'

He must certainly have got through a bottle, thought Henry, for Cockburn's words were slurred and his face had a deep, unnatural flush. Henry closed the door, and the blare of the dance music was suddenly deadened.

'Come and sit down,' said Cockburn. 'This is quite an occasion, as I see it. This is the last time we may be having a drink together. Let's drink.'

Henry sat down in the next chair. There was no use denying what Cockburn had said. Cockburn did not come to Chinnar as regularly as did most of the other planters, and it was out of the question that he would still be about for Chinnar Week next year.

'Won't you be coming up, sir; now and then?' asked Henry.

'Not bloody likely. For one thing, Lamlung is so terribly cut off y'know, takes a full day to get here, and you have to cross the Tista over a bamboo-and-rope bridge. . . . We're for ever having some drunken coolie go crashing down onto the rocks. And after that

you have to do the last mile or so by pony. But it's wonderful when you get there. If it wasn't so terribly difficult to get at, I'd ask you to come over for a week-end. Wonderful fishing; the best in Assam! Would you care to come?"

Lamlung was the last place on earth Henry had any desire to visit. He felt a little guilty as he said, 'I'd have loved to, thank you very much; but not during the next few weeks, I'm afraid. You see, I've promised to be on hand in case the Tista one-tusker shows up.'

'Yes, of course,' said Cockburn. 'You'll have to be extremely careful over that business; very careful. Have you got a good shikari?'

'The very best,' answered Henry. 'Chap called Kistulal; by far the best tracker in Assam. Runs in the family. His father shot with Leveson and got killed by a man-eater. This fellow's already lame, one leg mauled by a bear; but he's still the best damned tracker in the province.'

'Tracking be blowed! Is he steady in an emergency? You know how the best of them may run when it comes to an emergency.'

'Oh, yes; Kistulal's steady as a rock, absolutely. And even if he wanted to, the poor chap can't run very fast, or climb trees—with that leg of his. Personally, I'd back him against any other guide in India.'

'Good!' said Cockburn. 'We can't have you going after mad elephants with a kutchha shikari. You are, er . . . doing exceedingly well. It would be such a pity. Pinto! - do chota pegs, please! I see that you have . . . er . . . strayed away from your . . . er, pursuits. Miss Walters is looking devastating to-day. What happened?'

'What you had expected, more or less. It seems there is another man; an officer from Daddy's regiment, no doubt. Oh, I like you more than anyone else but— you know that kind of thing. What the Americans call a brush-off. I say, on your way back, will you be seeing your friend in Tmapur? —Henderson.'

'The station-master? I don't know. If he's about when I go through. Why?'

'I was wondering if . . . wondering if you'd mind mentioning to him that I could give that girl, Miranda, a job at Silent Hill. If she were just to send in an application. . . .'

'Oh, yes, of course,' Cockburn promised. 'I'll make a point of seeing him.'

'It would be . . . well, it would, sort of take care of the proprieties,'

said Henry, 'if she were to apply for the post rather than my sending for her, out of the blue. . . Raise no end of a scandal, what? See what I mean?'

'Perfectly,' said Cockburn very solemnly. 'Perfectly. We must see that the proprieties are not violated, at all costs. Ah; here's to the proprieties!' and Cockburn raised his glass and drank.

10

Revengeful God

THE proprieties, such as they were, were scrupulously attended to. Henry Winton received Ruby Miranda's application for the post of headmistress of the school at Silent Hill within two days of his return from Chinnar; and Henry waited a whole week before sending her the letter of appointment telling her to report for work.

And with that, he tried to put Ruby Miranda out of his mind.

But it was not easy to put a girl like Ruby Miranda out of one's mind. Apart from the fact that Henry had found himself thinking more and more of her physical charms, there were the purely administrative complications created by her appointment. In order to be able to pay her a hundred rupees per month, he had found it necessary to make her the head teacher. It was only after her application had been received that he had found that she had received very little schooling. He knew that Sarkar, his present school teacher, had matriculated at Calcutta University; he was bound to make a protest about someone less qualified than himself being put over his head.

But that was something that could not be helped. Henry could not visualize a girl like Ruby Miranda as an underling to a man like Sarkar-babu.

It was unfortunate that old Sarkar-babu had to be superseded, but Henry had never felt particularly distressed about what Sarkar would think or say. If he didn't like to serve under Miss Miranda, he was welcome to leave, and that was all there was to it. And he knew perfectly well that there was not the least likelihood of Sarkar-babu's throwing away his job in protest.

Oh, yes; Sarkar was going to be dead easy to deal with. He was the typical habu; grinning, servile, grovelling, almost dog-like; he was the ideal Indian subordinate, the kind of man who was totally incapable of thinking in terms of hitting back—in the last analysis, the kind of man on whom the business of the Empire rested.

Henry was glad that Sarkar was not a man like Jugal Kishore, capable of being damned awkward over a question of rights, dangerous, cunning, vindictive; soft and yielding whenever it suited him, but equally capable of violent recoil. It was just as well that Miss Miranda was superseding Sarkar and not someone like Jugal Kishore. You could not put down a man like Jugal Kishore with bluster, by telling him to take it or leave it. You needed far bigger guns; bigger guns and plenty of ammunition too. Henry was just as determined as ever to get rid of Jugal Kishore, but he was aware that it was not a process that could be rushed.

The new labour laws were all on the side of the employee; it was difficult to get rid of a permanent employee. But of course there were always ways of doing it, and Henry was in no hurry; and he certainly did not want to give Jugal Kishore the satisfaction of assuming that his complaint to the police had had the slightest effect on Henry. It was important not to rush things.

But Henry had already begun his campaign; had already piled up a good deal of ammunition. He had gone through the reports of all the recent labour demands and was gratified to see that Jugal Kishore figured prominently in every one of them. It was Jugal Kishore who had organized a committee which called itself the Council of Labour, and the names of the members of the Council headed Henry's private 'black list'. You could not get rid of a man for organizing labour, of course; but that was the sort of argument you needed to convince Sudden after you had managed to get rid of the man. Sudden was sure to back you up all the way through if you convinced him that the real reason for your getting rid of an old employee was that he was a Bolshy. For the actual, official reason of dismissal, he would have to wait until the next drunken brawl amongst the coolies or some kind of rumpus in which Jugal Kishore figured, however indirectly. Then he would be able to make a proper case against him. It was just a question of waiting until the cards fell into the right order.

Since Henry's return from the Chinnar Week, Jugal Kishore had carried out his duties with excessive diligence and docility, and for a time Henry had wondered if his subordinate had any inkling that the manager was gunning for him. Henry himself had behaved as though nothing had happened; as though he were totally unaware of the complaint that Jugal Kishore had lodged with the police in Tinapur. He was, therefore, all the more surprised when,

one evening, his head boy came and told him that Jugal Kishore-babu wanted to see him.

'Tell him to come to the office, to-morrow.'

'He says he wishes to see sahib on some private matter.'

It was one of the Brindian Company's unwritten rules that any of the supervisors or higher servants of the company who wished to see their manager at his bungalow on any private business could do so between seven and eight in the evening. Henry now realized that it would look pointed if he were to send Jugal Kishore away without seeing him.

'Tell him to wait in the verandah,' said Henry.

He took a long time before going out, thinking out in advance what he was going to say if Jugal Kishore brought up the subject of the complaint to the police. He decided not to say anything about it himself.

When he came out into the verandah, Henry noticed that Jugal Kishore was not alone, he had his niece with him. Damned odd that his head-boy had not said anything about her being there, Henry thought. It was almost certain that Jugal Kishore had bribed him not to say anything about her. Or was it that he was just being discreet?—having been used to escorting good-looking Indian women to the manager's bungalow during Wallach's time.

'Good evening, sir,' said Jugal Kishore, folding his hands with excessive servility, and keeping them folded. He was wearing a thick, rumpled grey-flannel suit and a brown pill-box cap. He had always worn the same kind of clothes since Henry had first seen him, five years earlier. 'Say "Good Evening" to Winton sahib, Gauri,' he said to his niece.

'Good evening, sir,' said his niece in a precise, high-school-trained accent, folding her hands.

So that was her name: Gauri. She had obviously dressed with care, in a speckled green silk sari and a red-and-green choli to go with it. In her hair was a thick chain of yellow flowers. Henry again caught himself wondering how anyone so exceptionally good-looking could be related to a man as ugly as Jugal Kishore. What kind of niece was she?—or was she no relation at all? One could never tell in India. If there were dozens of degrees of marriage, how many kinds of female relations?

'Good evening,' said Henry stiffly. 'And what can I do for you,

Jugal Kishore?' He kept standing himself so that he should not have to invite them to sit down.

'This is my niece Gauri,' said Jugal Kishore, simpering. His teeth were stained black with the juice of paan and tobacco.

'I once caught her stealing tea leaf,' remarked Henry.

'Young people are always getting into mischief, sahib,' replied Jugal Kishore, touching his forehead with his still-folded hands. 'Sahib was too kind in letting her take the bag away; too kind,' and Jugal Kishore gave a laugh, sly and meaningful.

Not a word of apology about his completely false complaint to the police: so Jugal Kishore had not come to say he was sorry. What did he want?

'I hope the thieving has stopped,' said Henry.

'Sahib is very kind,' answered Jugal Kishore. 'Gauri wanted to say sorry. Say "I am sorry" to the sahib, Gauri,' he said to his niece.

'I am very sorry,' said Gauri with a faint smile on her face.

'Well, don't do it again,' said Henry sternly. 'Nothing else, is there?'

'Yes, sahib,' Jugal Kishore said. 'My niece has read up to the seventh book in Hindi and five books in English. I understand there is a vacancy for an assistant teacher in the school here. . '

'I don't think your niece is suitable' Henry cut in curtly.

'She is fully qualified, sahib. Gauri got her education in the Tina-pur railway colony high school and she has passed

'I'm sorry but the job is already filled'

'Gauri is much better qualified than loco-babu Miranda's daughter, sahib,' said Jugal Kishore. 'She can speak and write English much better, and Hindi is her mother tongue. It is in Hindi that she will have to teach in the garden school'

She should have applied earlier' said Henry weakly, feeling really irritated that Jugal Kishore had already found out about his having offered the job to Ruby Miranda. 'It is no use coming here after the job is filled'

'No one knew anything about the job, sahib, besides, an unqualified teacher can be removed at any time' Jugal Kishore pointed out

'Since you seem to know the regulations so well,' answered Henry, 'there's no use my telling you that the garden school is entirely my own business, not the company's; and any appointment at a hundred rupees a month is entirely within my powers. I don't even have to refer to head office'

'My niece will be content to work as assistant teacher; at sixty rupees a month. She would not be superseding Sarkar-babu,' said Jugal Kishore very humbly, once again touching his forehead with his folded hands.

'I'm afraid it's not possible, Jugal Kishore.'

'Has the sahib anything else in mind?'

'No, nothing.'

'Was there some other kind of . . . er, service sahib was expecting from Miranda's daughter . . . like Wallach sahib . . . ?'

'I have discussed the subject quite enough, Jugal Kishore,' said Henry, reminding himself that he must keep cool.

'I only wanted to say that if there was some such service, my niece would be quite willing to . . .'

'I have nothing more to say,' said Henry.

'Is not my niece as beautiful as Miss Miranda?' asked Jugal Kishore, unfolding his hands for the first time, and pointing a finger at Gauri, who had pulled the end of her sari over her face.

'I'm sorry, but I can't take her on,' said Henry with finality, but still with surprising evenness.

'Why not?' asked Jugal Kishore in a trembling voice. 'Why not? Is she not as beautiful as the Miranda girl? Look! Look!' and he reached out and pulled Gauri's sari away from her head and shoulders. 'Look!' and he tugged viciously at the knot of her choli, laying bare her full, firm breasts, startlingly white against the olive tan of her face and arms.

'The question of looks has nothing to do with it.'

'And is she not better qualified?'

'I dare say she is.'

'Then why not? Because she happens to be an Indian? -pure Indian?'

At last Jugal Kishore had asked the question Henry had been waiting for. He said, still very coldly, still without raising his voice, 'Because she's a thief, because I do not wish to employ anyone in my school who is personally known to me to be a thief.'

'I think sahib is making a mistake,' said Jugal Kishore; but Henry knew that he had made his point, and the other wilted almost visibly, his confidence suddenly drained away. Gauri turned her face away as though she had been slapped, and began to sob violently.

'Take her away,' ordered Henry, raising his voice at last. He

turned on his heels and walked to the doorway where he stopped and shouted, 'A thief!'

As the day of Ruby Miranda's arrival approached, Henry's anticipation mounted. He found it difficult to keep his thoughts away from her. He would picture her coming to his office every now and then, at first primly, but afterwards with increasingly easy familiarity. He began to long for her, looking forward to the nearness of a woman, to talk and byplay vaguely connected with sex; the meaningful half-smile, the knowing glance, the naughty word, deliberately slipped in, the easy blush. He could picture her coming into his bungalow in the evenings, ultimately setting up a beautiful dual relationship like that of a fictional French mistress: the perfect, efficient schoolmistress during office hours, the deliciously wanton companion of non-duty hours.

And in spite of himself Henry began to count the days to her arrival; as he tore off the date on his desk calendar, the thought never failed to cross his mind that it was one day less to wait for her.

Only three more days were left when the tea lorry brought over a telegram from the post office three miles away in the valley, and at first Henry could think only that it had something to do with Ruby Miranda's arrival. Had she suddenly decided not to take on the job?

It was a telegram from the district commissioner, Barloe, and it told him that the one-tusked rogue had shown up again. The elephant had trampled down a rice field and destroyed a whole row of scarecrows in the vicinity of Lamlung. Lamlung, of all places; Cockburn's garden.

'Send for Kistulal,' said Henry to the head boy waiting behind his chair, 'Kistulal the shikari.' For the first time in two weeks Ruby Miranda had gone completely out of his thoughts as they turned swiftly to the famed one-tusked rogue, the elephant he, Henry Winton, was going to hunt and kill. He was embarking on a heady, exhilarating adventure such as comes to a hunter but once in a lifetime.

One of the reasons the one-tusked rogue was still alive was that it had become something of a god—Ganesha, their elephant-god also had only one tusk. The villagers in the tea district were getting

increasingly reluctant to report the animal's whereabouts. But when it made a kill they could not keep its presence a secret because of the police inquiry that followed such a death. In the ordinary way, the tea district farmers offered prayers and gifts to propitiate the one-tusker—and each hoped that his offerings would keep it away from his own fields.

Everyone in the tea district had heard of the one-tusked rogue; of how clever and diabolically cunning it was, how revengeful, and yet how kind, considerate, even magnanimous. Legends grow more vigorously upon Indian soil than almost anywhere else in the world. Smothered as they were, in the mumbo-jumbo of native lore, Henry Winton had always found it difficult to dig down to the truth of the elephant's doings. He had gone about it systematically, closely questioning anyone who had come directly into contact with the animal, but it had always been difficult to get them to talk; everyone seemed to fear the vengeance of the elephant-god.

Everyone, except Kistulal the shikari. Kistulal was a casteless, godless man, an aboriginal, a Bhil or a Gond; and to him, the killing of the animals in the jungle was not merely a question of earning a livelihood, of baksheesh, it was equally a question of professional pride, of skill and courage and teamwork. Above all, it was a question of zidd, of a lifelong feud against wild animals, dating from the time when, as a young man, he had been mauled by a bear. The bear had charged at him quite unprovoked and felled him and torn his leg with its four-inch claws, ripping out the flesh in shreds as he had lain back feebly kicking at the bear's face. Now, he had no pity for the animals of the jungle, no tender feelings of any sort: he was a killer, pure and simple, proud of his profession. It was his business to track an animal down and to get his hunter within range of a shot, and he was unshakably convinced that no one else could track down an animal as well as he, Kistulal. At the end of it, all he asked for was a hunter who did not panic and who shot straight. An animal of the jungle expertly tracked down and cleanly killed was to Kistulal like his pooja to the Vedic brahmin, a purely spiritual reward it was something more than the craftsman's pleasure, purely professional, at a neatly executed piece of work; and at the same time, it was a further step in the fulfilment of a continuous, lifelong vendetta against the dark forces of the jungle.

Kistulal had been a shikari all his conscious life, and understood

the jungle better than anyone else; and he had always been full of praise for Henry.

'Sahib is steady; sahib is as good as Karbeet-saab,' he had said to Henry Winton after their last hunt for a black bear in the Pagoda valley. That was the fourth year they had hunted together, and Henry had experienced the surge of elation that only a big-game hunter could feel when told that he is as good as Jim Corbett.

All the same, it was just as well that neither he, Henry Winton, nor his shikari, Kistulal, was superstitious; otherwise there would have been little chance of their going out to kill an elephant which everyone else seemed to be convinced was something of a god.

What had made the one-tusker a confirmed rogue was, of course, an act of human folly. A farmer, waiting up in his field at night for pig or deer, had fired a buckshot at him. Henry had had a talk with that farmer, and he could visualize the man, standing helplessly in the open field flooded in moonlight, looking at the immense grey bulk of the elephant trampling down his almost ripe crop of rice. He had raised his muzzle-loader and fired, almost without realizing what he was doing, more in desperation and anger than with any positive intention of killing the elephant.

Elephants cannot turn their heads much. The one-tusker had turned its whole body, slowly and deliberately, like a field-gun being aimed, and then it had trumpeted loudly and charged. The farmer had turned and fled, dropping his useless gun.

'Then I slipped in the mud and fell down,' the man had told Henry, 'fell down in the tall, waist-high rice.'

The elephant had stopped dead in its tracks, its enormous trunk wriggling up and down like a snake, trying to scent where its attacker had suddenly vanished. And then it had seen a scarecrow standing a few yards away from where the farmer had fallen, and had rushed at it, felling it with a blow of its trunk. It had gone at it again and again, trampling it in the mud with its feet and trunk and stabbing at it viciously with its single tusk. Its career as a rogue had begun from that day. Whenever it came upon a figure it attacked, making no distinction between scarecrows or men and women.

That had been two years ago. It had killed three men and one woman up to now and had destroyed scores of scarecrows.

'He is an incarnation of Ganesha, the elephant-god,' many a villager had told Henry in all seriousness. 'The great God Ganesha

too has only one tusk. He will kill many men and women; no one will kill him, ever.'

There was absolutely no question of appealing to their reason. If you pointed out that if the beast were really something of a god, it would not go about killing innocent farmers and destroying their crops, they would tell you that its victims were sure to have committed some unforgivable sins during their previous lives and were being punished in this one.

That was the sort of thing you were constantly coming up against, and it was almost impossible to expect much co-operation from the semi-aboriginal villagers of the tea district when they knew that you were out to kill the one-tusker; they had no wish to participate in an open war against a revengeful, temperamental God. It was the sort of inconsistency you could not remove with common sense. The Indian people had been given the fullest possible measure of self-rule, with their own ministers in the provinces. But their politicians, not content with that, were forever clamouring for more and more power; they wanted the British to quit the country altogether. It was only a political stunt, of course, for even the Indian leaders could not have been serious about such a demand. The very thought of what would happen to the country if the British ever took it into their heads to quit was enough to make you shudder.

'Kistulal has come, sahib,' his head boy came to tell Henry; and there, right behind him, was Kistulal himself, black and diminutive, grinning as ever and full of bounce. It was good to see Kistulal, the professional hunter, a link with the all-male, hairy-chested world of big-game hunting.

'We shall be starting early in the morning,' said Henry, 'first thing in the morning, so that we get into Lamlung before dark.'

'As early as you like, sahib; as early as sahib can wake up,' said Kistulal, squatting down near the fire uninvited, bringing with him a whiff of the atmosphere of the hunting camps; of early rising and smoking fires and the damp smells of the jungle, and also the anticipation and the fear.

'It is a very cold evening, sahib,' pronounced Kistulal, and he blew on his hands and shook his shoulders as though he were shivering with the cold.

It was the camp-fire atmosphere all right, right in Henry Winton's sitting room, for that was Kistulal's way of demanding a

drink. A shikari had certain privileges, and even the servants were aware of them, for the house boy was still hovering in the room.

'Bring Kistulal a rum and pani,' Henry ordered, 'a stiff rum and pani.'

'Not too much pani, ohe,' Kistulal said to the boy, grinning.

They set out as planned, at crack of dawn the next morning. It was nine days before Henry returned to Silent Hill. By that time, Ruby Miranda had already been there for nearly a week.

11

Kistulal was always grinning

THEY had driven down from Silent Hill, Henry and his shikari, starting at dawn as planned. Even so, it was late in the evening when they got into Lamlung.

Cockburn had a hot bath and a meal waiting. 'Change into your pyjamas,' he said to Henry. 'We'll eat in front of the sitting-room fire in our dressing gowns.'

It was a good dinner that Cockburn had laid on, and he had even opened a bottle of Moselle although Henry knew that he did not much care for wine himself. 'I'm a rum and whisky man,' Cockburn always said. It was nice of Cockburn to have brought out a bottle of wine because he was coming, Henry thought.

So in the end it was the elephant god that brought you to Lamlung,' Cockburn remarked.

'I'm very glad he did, sir, really glad.'

'Well, here's wishing you all the luck.' Cockburn said, raising his glass high. 'Here's to your elephant.'

'Here's to the elephant!'

'You'll be wanting to start fairly early to-morrow, I expect,' said Cockburn. 'Tell the head boy what time you would like your bed-tea. Order whatever you want.'

'Thanks.'

'I expect you're all organized now.' No point in offering to lend you my rifle. I have a five hundred express here, double-barrelled.'

'No, thanks. I'm using my four-sixty-five, double-barrelled too, by Roland Lock. You know how one gets attached to a weapon.'

'Must be quite a gun, much more striking power than a five hundred.'

'Oh, rather, terrific wallop.'

'How are you off for ammunition?'

'Very well, a whole box. Twenty cartridges.'

'That ought to take care of a whole herd of elephants, with

you doing the shooting. Does your man carry a bandook too?' 'Who—Kistulal? Lord, no! His business is to do the tracking. . . .'

'Your business to shoot, what?'

'That's right.'

'I don't suppose you'd want one of my men to go with you?'

'No, thank you,' said Henry politely. 'We are, sort of, used to each other's ways, you know, don't want to have to look after a third man.'

'I quite agree.'

'I expect you'll want to turn in early,' Cockburn had remarked soon after dinner. 'Don't forget to tell the head boy what you want.'

They set out at crack of dawn, the hunter and his guide; a team, like a tank-driver and his gunner, fully rehearsed in their separate roles, with the fullest confidence in each other's skill, each wholly dependent on the other. They did not follow the elephant's tracks for long, but only to determine the direction it was heading for. The track was already over a day old and there was no point in following it in the hope of running into the elephant. They were both seasoned hunters and were sticking to the plan of action formed back at Silent Hill. Actually, it was Kistulal's plan.

'We will determine the direction he has gone in, first,' Kistulal had said, 'then we will make tracks for the nearest rice-field in that direction and hope that he turns up there in the afternoon.'

'In the afternoon? What do we do if he doesn't turn up before the night?'

'Oh, he'll come before sundown all right. I'm prepared to bet on it. You don't know how I have studied this elephant.'

'I expect you have,' answered Henry. 'I'll leave it all to you.'

'Of course, that would mean taking him on in the open field. We two will stand close together, just like a pair of scarecrows; not moving until he charges.'

'Oh, yes?'

'Then sahib shoots and I watch.'

'If you can stop grinning.'

At that, Kistulal's grin had become wider than ever, showing his even, strong, white teeth in his face made of black rubber.

'Sahib will have to shoot very carefully, get both shots in just

when he begins his charge, so that two more are ready when he gets really close—just in case of emergency.'

'I'll drop him before he reaches us; there won't be an emergency,' Henry had assured him. 'I'll place my shots carefully.'

'Oh, I'm not worried. But it is a dangerous business, shooting a rogue elephant the way we mean to shoot him; charging at you when you are right out in the open. Even if you are a very good shot, you want to run away. But sahib can shoot steady, I know that, and place his bullets exactly where he wants them. And I know sahib will not run away.'

'The sahib will do his part of the job all right, just you see that you do yours,' said Henry.

When, late in the afternoon, they were standing in the paddy field they had selected, at least six miles away from the Lam-lung tea estate, waiting for the elephant to show up, Kistulal was once again grinning. Henry had shot a fair amount of Indian big game, including, of course, wild elephant, but he had never waited for an elephant right out in an open field and in broad daylight, offering himself as a target to be attacked, and then expecting to shoot the animal down while it charged. In the jungle, there was always a bush or a tree stump or an anthill to hide behind. It had never been like this before, fully exposed and vulnerable. He felt naked and nervous and unaccountably hungry, and he had to fight down a tendency to yawn.

And then he happened to look at Kistulal, black and small and wiry, standing close behind him, scanning the edges of the field with his cold, black, sniper's eyes, totally unarmed but cool and completely at ease, and still with a trace of that idiotic grin on his face. And even as Henry was looking at Kistulal, frail and wizened and barefoot, he noticed a change come over his face: the faint grin faded out.

That was how Henry Winton had become aware that the one-tusker had already come into their field.

For a long time, over the hammering of his heart, Henry continued to hear the rhythmic rustle of the elephant's pads swishing through the standing rice and squelching into the mud. It was late in the afternoon, and the weak, winter sun had already touched the hill-tops in the west. The elephant came unhesitatingly, cutting across the field about a hundred and fifty yards in front of them,

huge and grey, its single tusk shining like copper in the sunlight and giving it a lop sided look. It walked as though it were heading a ceremonial procession, purposeful and unhurried, looking exactly as Henry had expected it to look, vaguely like a god. Only when it had come directly in front of them did it halt, but it was still too far away for a shot. For a few seconds, it wriggled the end of its trunk, obviously trying to locate the human scent, and slowly, ponderously turned its body, setting its head in their direction. It paused for a few seconds more, as though making doubly sure of its aim. Then it lifted its trunk, spread out its ears and charged.

That was the last detail Henry remembered with clarity, the rest was a confused, fragmented blur on his memory.

He remembered raising his rifle, aiming just at the root of the uplifted trunk, for that was where the line between the eyes would be, and then pressing the trigger, oh so smoothly, realizing that he was nervous no longer, but cool and deliberate and doing everything right, and then hearing the cold, leathery snap of the hammer pin instead of the pop of the shell going off.

Then there was panic in his heart. He remembered snatching at the second trigger, not pressing any more, and hearing another dead click, the quick breaking of the rifle and the two big shells being thrown high into the air by the ejector mechanism. He remembered loading with two more cartridges and firing in quick succession, now point blank at the elephant barely twenty yards away, and hearing two more deadly metallic clicks.

He remembered the shock, the sudden acceptance of total, shattering defeat, of shouting to Kistulul to run and at the same time, turning and taking to his heels, only vaguely conscious that Kistulul could not run very fast.

And he remembered Kistulul's terrified, heart rending scream, he would never forget that scream all his life.

He stopped dead in his tracks, barely fifty yards away, and watched, as though spellbound, unable to drag his eyes away. He saw the moment of death, when the frail figure of the hunter was felled with a lash of the powerful, coiling trunk and stamped into the ground in a squelchy mess of mud and blood, lifted high up again, now limp and lifeless like a rag doll and smashed down with a powerful thud that shook the ground, and then neatly, methodically stamped into the oozy earth by those great horny feet. . . .

He had turned and fled, running wildly into the jungle, and

then, when he tired and could run no more, slowing into a walk, but never stopping, never looking back. He must have walked for miles and miles after that, through the darkening, smothering jungle, heading for the bare patch on the opposite hill side which he knew must be the Lamlung tea estate. He was numbed and bruised and bleeding, but he was still carrying his heavy elephant gun and his leather haversack with the rest of the cartridges when he reached Cockburn's bungalow late that night. At the back of his mind, the evidence of the rifle and the misfiring cartridges was some how terribly important. He remembered leaning the rifle against the hat rack in Cockburn's verandah, and Cockburn's enormous black-and-tan dog coming out barking furiously and then recognizing him and licking his hands and face, and then Cockburn himself, in his red plaid dressing gown holding up a lantern.

12

Variations on a theme

'DON'T even attempt to speak about it,' said Cockburn. 'Just drink that down and relax.'

Henry Winton held the glass in both hands and drank. It was neat brandy, raw and fierce. It was supposed to give you courage, warmth, a feeling of vitality. What Henry wanted was consolation and reassurance. Brandy was a wonderful substitute.

From that point onward his mind was less blurred. He remembered his arrival itself only vaguely: first Cockburn's Alsatian dog jumping at him in welcome, and then Cockburn himself in a gaudy woollen dressing gown coming out into the verandah holding up a lantern, for, of course, Lamlung had no electricity.

'Christ! You must be cold,' Cockburn had said in a voice full of concern, and he had yelled for his houseboys to get a fire going. He had half-dragged, half-led Henry into the sitting-room and put him into a chair and put his own Scotch plaid dressing-gown round his shoulders. Then he had brought out the bottle of brandy and poured out a stiff peg.

'Drink that up and you'll feel better.'

Now that lamps had been lighted and the brandy was doing its work, Henry's thought processes began to resume coherence; it was time to face some of the questions he had kept suppressed.

What were the values? Henry kept asking himself. What were the obligations of a hunter? Were you responsible for seeing that your shikari did not come to any harm through neglect on your part? If he did, what was the retribution?

Cockburn, without his dressing-gown now, thin and wrinkled and grey, was exceedingly understanding, of course, not asking any questions at all. He was being the pukka-sahib, cool yet casual. He had lit a cigarette and passed it to Henry and then lit one for himself. The fire was going nicely now, and the Alsatian had got over his first burst of welcome. Soon, very soon, Henry knew he would

have to tell everything; to put his nightmare into words. He wished he could stop the shivering of his shoulders.

Cockburn was standing before him with another glass in his hands. 'This is even better,' he said. 'It's a hot grog. Just sip it slowly.'

Henry took the glass in his hand and sipped. It tasted of brandy and lime-juice and honey and cinnamon, and it was steaming hot. It was good, strong stuff; hot grog was bloody good.

'Bloody good!' said Henry. 'Thanks.' That was the first thing he had said that night when he had come, winded and dishevelled, wet, mud-spattered, numbed with cold and fear, back from his hunt for the one-tusker.

'Kistulal is dead,' Henry told Cockburn.

'Oh, my God!' said Cockburn. 'I thought something like that had happened. But please don't try to think about it. You don't have to tell me, unless you want to.'

'Dead,' said Henry very flatly. 'Killed by the elephant-god; the blasted elephant-god!'

'They were fresh cartridges,' he kept telling Cockburn. 'Absolutely fresh. I ordered the box from Gungaram's only a few weeks ago -- I didn't need to test them.'

'Of course not,' Cockburn assured him. 'I don't think anyone would -- not from a fresh box.'

There were the formalities. The police had to be informed, and the body cremated after the police had finished their investigations. Cockburn had taken charge of all that; Cockburn who now represented the cool centre of a world in turmoil, the personification of a quiet, almost wordless efficiency.

Henry had gone to bed after the hot grog, and, though he did not sleep a wink, in the morning, after a shave and a scalding hot bath, he felt much better.

'I've ordered breakfast,' said Cockburn. 'Eggs and bacon and coffee. You must try and eat. Would you like some rum in the coffee?'

'No thanks.'

Henry ate hungrily and drank three cups of coffee, strong, sweet, and thick with cream. The ridiculous thought crossed his mind that Sudden did not approve of any of his managers' drinking coffee for breakfast; and then he wondered what Sudden would

have to say about Kistulal's death. After breakfast they went and sat in the glazed verandah overlooking the valley and lit their pipes.

'How d'you feel now?' asked Cockburn.

'Much better, thank you, but tired, terribly tired.'

'D'you know, you must have been walking for over six hours last night—must have covered at least fifteen miles.'

'It seemed much more. It seemed never ending.'

'No wonder you were tired out. Actually the rice field you are talking about is not more than five miles from here—well, six at the most, and there is a perfectly good bridle path all the way. As a matter of fact, it's my favourite snipe shooting spot.'

'I never struck the path,' said Henry. 'It was jungle all the time, thorn mostly.'

'I've sent a man to collect those cartridges of yours,' Cockburn said.

'Cartridges?

'The ones ejected when you re-loaded. Only two, you said.'

'Yes, only two.'

'The other two, the ones you loaded again—were still in the rifle when you got here. Both with big dents in the cups.'

'Why have you sent someone to bring back the cartridges?'

'You see, what the police get there I would not like, rather they didn't find any cartridges there.'

'Why on earth not?'

'Just in case,' Cockburn said—just in case you live to—'You know, Henry, you might have to alter your story slightly.'

Henry looked at Cockburn with surprise and a touch of anger. Cockburn's sharp closed face held an anxious look, and the eyes had the suggestion of a smile—he looked wholly sincere.

'Alter it? But it's the truth.'

'I know it is,' said Cockburn, his face breaking into hard, pleasant creases. 'Of course no one would doubt a word of what you have said. But I have been thinking about it. I rather think we shall have to make up a slightly different story—see what I mean?'

'Why?'

'Well, it won't do you a bit of good as a hunter, and it won't do you any good as a man—a career man. They'll always say damaging things; they'll even say you got scared at the last moment and ran away. Even the most sympathetic will always say that you

were careless in not testing your cartridges before you went out shooting an elephant; a known rogue—a killer. They'll say it is hardly likely that you didn't. . . .'

'But God's teeth! They were a fresh lot; no one does.'

'I know that, but everyone is supposed to, with cartridges you buy out here. Who knows how many years they may have been lying in the shop? I know that in practice no one does, I never have myself. Luckily, it's not as though your hammer pins were weak or anything—no fault with the rifle itself, I mean.'

'None at all, you can check up.'

I did ' answered Cockburn blandly. 'There's nothing the matter with the rifle. The two cartridges in it had been punched with quite a bit of force. Besides, the pins make a clean puncture in teak wood, and they have to be pretty strong to do that. It was the cartridges all right.'

'I can't be blamed for dud cartridges if a firm like Gungaham's sells me no good cartridges.'

'No one's blaming you, Henry, bear that in mind. Our main concern now should be to clear up as much of the mess as possible. It is really more a question of what of face saving.'

'Dammit, I didn't kill the man,' said Henry angrily.

No one is saying you did. And yet it is not as simple as all that. They will always say Winton sahib offered to shoot the elephant—god, Winton sahib asked Kistulal to go hunting with him and show him the elephant. They'll say that Kistulal did his job; Winton sahib didn't.'

But it's true enough, my good sir, true! It hurts like hell to have to own up to it, of course, but it happens to be the truth. The grinning black bastard did his job beautifully. I didn't.'

'It will kill your reputation as a big game hunter.'

'I don't give a damn,' said Henry defiantly.

You do care, Henry. You have all your life to spend in this country—in the tea district. You can't afford not to care.'

'Tell me how anyone—anyone at all—can blame me if my shikari died as the result of an accident.'

It is not all that much of an accident, really; when you go out looking for a killer elephant you almost go looking for accidents, and you take all precautions to see that they don't happen. There's such a thing as the hunter's responsibility—you know—to look after his shikari.'

'I don't care if I never go hunting again; in fact, I don't want to ever.'

'That'll only make things worse. Then they'll say you really did funk. Also there's that promise of yours to kill the one-tusker. Besides . . .'

'Besides what?'

'Well, let's face it, Henry. It will finish your career as a planter. You'll end your days in a backwater garden, off the ladder altogether, unless they can get rid of you earlier. Sudden will never forgive you for having let down the side in the eyes of his powerful friends in the Government; perhaps the Governor himself. Barloe's pitch with his minister will be queered more than ever; the Indian ministers will laugh their heads off; and the villagers will whisper behind your back, pointing a finger at you. They can understand incivility—indeed they almost expect it from the ruling class. But never cowardice—forgive the word—running away in the face of danger.'

'It's certainly a frightening thought,' admitted Henry.

'The way we handle this . . . this incident now will make all the difference between success and failure. If you're determined to make a go of your career here, you cannot afford to be tied down to a suburban conscience.'

No, Henry reflected. There was no room in India for sahibs who failed, that was the over-riding truth; they were despised even more by their own class than by the Indians. Failure was unthinkable; it was the abyss, dark and bottomless. The slackening of the moral fibre, on the other hand, was something that his system was getting used to.

'And there's the press. My God, you don't know the Indian press' Cockburn was saying. 'If they get a sahib in their mangle, particularly when it concerns something we ourselves profess to do better than the Indians . . . The political capital the Gandhis and Nehrus will make this sort of thing. . . '

'I didn't know that a shooting accident could conceivably lead to anything political.'

'In India, everything that concerns a sahib is political, damn it. His very presence is the basis of all their political agitation.'

You know,' said Henry, 'you're talking exactly like Sir Jeffrey Dait; as though in a moment you'll be talking about the side.'

Cockburn's face once again broke into a pleasant smile. 'There is

a Hindi proverb which says that when you have to live in the water, you cannot carry on a feud with the fishes. You're a planter; you have to live by Sudden's values. After all's said and done, there's no denying Sudden knows what makes the Empire tick better than any of us. He may be a pompous fool, but in many ways he represents the British Empire even more than the Viceroy himself.'

'And you think there's sufficient ground in . . . in whatever has happened, for Sudden to feel let down?'

'Oh yes. You as a career man cannot afford to expose yourself to any such damaging scandal; to lose face with the Indians is your death warrant.'

'D'you mean to say I shouldn't even tell Sudden about it?'

'Sudden least of all. He lives by a set of values far more rigid than any one else's. If you're a career man you cannot afford to take chances—Ah, here's the man I sent to look for those damned cartridges.'

'There was only one, sahib,' said the man, producing a cigar-sized brass shell from his pocket.

'There were two, damn you!' exclaimed Cockburn sharply. 'What happened to the other one?'

'I looked for a long time, sahib, it must have got buried in the mud. There was ankle deep mud in the field.'

'That's right,' said Henry. 'I suppose anything as heavy as that cartridge dropping into the mud would get instantly buried.'

'Oh, all right,' said Cockburn, still looking doubtful. He took the cartridge to the window and examined it carefully. 'Just as I said,' he remarked, turning to Henry. 'The hammer pin's punched quite a hole in the cap, see? No, there's nothing wrong with your four-sixty-five.'

'It was all due to the bloody cartridges,' said Henry. 'British made cartridges too.'

'The weather in this country can play havoc with cartridges,' Cockburn said. He went into his office room and came out fluttering a five-rupee note. He handed it to the coolie. The man salaamed politely, but Henry noticed that he did not smile as Indian coolies always did in token of saying 'Thank you'. And then Henry realized with a sudden catch that the man had just seen the mangled mess of flesh and blood and bones lying in a rice field—the remains of his shikari.

'What do you think I should say?' Henry asked Cockburn later that day. 'What story should I tell?'

'You weren't there,' said Cockburn flatly. 'We can't have you round when the man was killed.'

'Where else could I have been?'

'Here, on the hogsback. Let's draw up a sketch of the rice field and the surroundings. You were up on this hill, close to the bridle-path. That's how far you two had gone trailing after the elephant. You were—let's see, two hundred yards away from the edge of the field, and you had sent this man Kistulal to see if the tracks led into the field. Wait—it was Kistulal who had told you to wait where you were so that he could go and find out whether the tracks led into the field. That would be much better. Clear so far?'

'Yes.'

'Kistulal was crossing the field, see, and the elephant must have been in the jungle on the other side. He saw the shikari first coming out into the open, charged, caught him and killed him.'

'Very unlikely with a man like Kistulal, he would have seen the elephant first: the man had the eyes of a hawk.'

'Never mind about that. We've got to keep this simple and fool-proof. You heard the scream of course, and then you ran towards the rice field. Let's say it took you two minutes to get there—a few seconds more or less. By the time you got there, the elephant had already finished. He was going away—away from you—no, no, across your front—that would be better. He was going away across your front, and you saw him just as he was about to disappear into the forest. Let's see—about how far would that be? Say—two hundred yards?'

'Then why didn't I fire at him?'

'You did,' said Cockburn.

'I did.'

'Oh, yes, who's going to say you didn't? You fired both barrels just as he was getting away—even at that extreme range, and you feel certain you got him in the side with at least one of your shots—that would be the left side.'

'So I did wound him.'

'Yes. Yes, you got him with at least one of the barrels. That should give Barloe his talking point and keep Sudden happy. Winton's shikari had gone off to see where the trail led to,' they'll say 'and if it hadn't been for the stupidity of his shikari, Winton

could easily have bagged the rogue that day.' As it was, you only wounded him, but until he shows up again, perhaps months from now, they can go on nursing the hope that your shot actually killed him. You can depend on the natives not to talk about his movements until he actually makes another kill – they won't squeal on their elephant-god.'

'Then why didn't I follow him up and finish him off?'

'With the shikari lying dead there? Of course not! That would have been quite out of character – inhuman, absolutely. You had to come back here to report his death, and you missed the way coming back in the dark.'

'I'm still not sure all this is really necessary,' said Henry.

'It's necessary only if you want to make a career in this country; otherwise it doesn't matter. And it's not as though it is going to hurt anyone. But of course it's up to you to decide.'

Henry Winton drew in his breath. 'I suppose it sounds all right; all perfectly plausible. I mean except that bit about my wounding the elephant.'

'That's a most important bit,' said Cockburn. 'Most important. Who do you think is going to prove he wasn't wounded? Only after someone has gone and bagged him can they go counting the bullet holes on him. That's a very chancey prospect at best, from what I can see, and anyway, let's hope that that someone is you, Henry.'

'You mean go after him again? Christ!'

'That's right. In fact you just have to. Everyone, Sudden and everyone, will think you are no end of a sport for keeping after the elephant after this incident. And if you do happen to bag him, why, you will have avenged Kastulal's death.'

'There's that, of course. But will the police play up, d'you think?'

'As far as they are concerned there won't even be much of an investigation, they will just have to accept your report. It's not as though there would be a complaint made to them, or anything like that. It's only when there is a complaint lodged with the police that they have to go round making inquiries.'

'They won't stumble on the cartridge, will they?'

'I shouldn't worry, no one can find what Damdoo has failed to find. . . .'

'And what about him? Won't he go shooting his mouth? Can he be trusted?'

Cockburn laughed. 'I can't think of anyone less to be trusted than Damdoo; he's almost incapable of telling the truth. But he's safe enough with me. He knows he'll have to reckon with me if he goes blabbing, and he won't like that. I know too much about him for his own good. Besides, he's an ex-convict . . . already done a term in prison. No one believes an ex-convict. Neat, what?'

'Yes, very neat,' agreed Henry. 'And thank you very much for all you're doing. I expect that's the story I'll have to stick to, for my own good. But I must say it makes me feel a worm.'

'Oh, you'll get over that,' retorted Cockburn. 'Don't let's start worrying about the rights and wrongs of it; all that matters is that you're not hurting anyone by this—this variation.'

'Except Kistulal. He would never . . .'

'I know how you must feel. Kistulal is dead. We must make it up to his dependants, somehow.'

'I say,' Henry exclaimed, 'did anyone hear my shots?'

'Nobody has, so far,' said Cockburn with a glint in his pale blue eyes. 'But before this evening is over, at least a dozen different people will have heard them.'

Later that evening, they went for a stroll up to the Tista bridge, and from the bridge, Cockburn dropped the three unexploded cartridges in the roaring torrent of the river a hundred feet below.

Now that he was going through with it, Henry could not help wishing that the fourth unexploded cartridge had been found, and he could not help mentioning his fear to Cockburn. 'I would have felt much less uneasy about it all,' he said.

'I shouldn't worry,' said Cockburn. 'No one is likely to go looking for the thing.'

13

Never Mind the Brandy

THEY had accepted Henry's story of the way Kistulal had met his death. Sudden, magnanimous as ever, had congratulated Henry on his resolve to go after the rogue if and when it re-appeared. At the same time, he had expressed the hope that the one-tusker would not trouble them again.

'Let's hope your shot's finished him, Henry,' Sudden had said. 'You know what damage a four-sixty-five solid can do—even if you have no more than gun-shot him, as you say, at two hundred yards.'

And Sudden had been generous to Kistulal's dependents. Kistulal had left three children and a wife, and at Henry's request Sudden had sanctioned a sum of five hundred rupees to be paid to the widow and a hundred rupees to each of the children. Henry himself had taken on Pasupati, Kistulal's eldest boy, as a daily-wage coolie at Silent Hill so that the family should have somewhere to live.

At the end of a week, when Henry had returned to Silent Hill, nothing was different. He was still the pucca sahib, still the tea district's principal big-game hunter; indeed, everyone was most sympathetic; and he had Cockburn to thank for it all. He shuddered at what would have happened if Cockburn had not been there to see to things.

At the same time, it had not been easy to pick up the threads of everyday life and resume the pattern from where he had left it off. On his return to Silent Hill, Henry found himself in the grip of a heavy depression, which lay like a dead weight on his chest, making him morose and irritable. He slept badly unless he had had a lot to drink, and then he would find himself wide awake and sweating in bed in the dead of night, thinking feverishly of the elephant and Kistulal. He hated to be alone and yet instead of looking forward to the week-ends at Chinnar, he found himself disliking the thought of the Chinnar week-ends intensely.

Was this how a man lost his mind? When he was no longer

capable of living with himself, or of facing company? Or sleeping without drugs, and afraid to face the sharp midnight convulsions of remorse? Was this what came of being tied to what Cockburn had described as a suburban conscience?

He was sitting in front of the log fire, and the dog was asleep on the sofa beside him. The radio was blaring loud Wagner music and the bottle of Johnnie Walker on the mantelpiece was nearly empty. He remembered with a mild shock that it had been at least half-full earlier in the evening. My God! was he growing into one of those bottle-a-day men they spoke of in the *Fast* – rapidly going to seed, like Wallach?

His head-boy came in, cleared his throat to announce his presence, and asked, 'Shall I lay sahib's ghussal?'

'My bath! What time is it?'

'Already nine o'clock.'

'Nine! – blast! Why the hell didn't you remind me before?'

'I did, sahib, twice.'

'Oh, all right. In ten minutes. Give me a drink first – a proper drink, damn you – a stiff one.'

The boy came back in ten minutes. 'Ghussal taiyar, sahib,' he announced.

'All right, pour me another drink first.'

'Shall I open a fresh bottle, sahib?'

'What? Khatum already? blast! Never mind, I'll have the ghussal first.'

'Shall I serve dinner after sahib's bath?'

'Achhi baat.'

Henry had his bath and came out wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown. The soup was already on the table, and Herman had taken up a position under the table. Henry ate without interest or appetite, reading *The Brothers Karamazov* and listening to the radio and all the while rubbing his bare feet on the dog's back. He pushed away his half-eaten plate of roast mutton and told the boy to bring coffee.

'There is a pudding, sahib,' the boy said.

'Pudding! Oh, no,' he shook his head.

'Lemole tarts, sahib. School miss-sahib sent. Very nice tarts.'

'What's that? Who sent them?' asked Henry.

'Miranda miss, sahib.'

'Oh, all right, bring them in. Bring the coffee afterwards, and the brandy.'

He had not forgotten Ruby Miranda by any means; but since he had been back, he had not felt the least inclination to see her. She must have been working in the school for more than two weeks now, he reflected. Strange that he had not spoken to her even once. It was sweet of her to send him something she had made herself, Henry thought, really touching.

The boy brought the tarts, nestling in a shallow blue dish; golden-yellow, creamy and light, and, surprisingly, they were piping hot.

He must go and see Miss Miranda at the school, perhaps send for her to come and see him at his bungalow, Henry was thinking as he picked up the crumbs from his plate with his fingers. He did not even wonder if she would come to his bungalow, for somehow the tarts she had sent set his mind at rest on that point. For the first time in weeks, his thoughts went rushing off in a new direction, breaking the shell of his gloom. It was like sunlight bursting through a heavy cloud formation; he was suddenly freed from his obsession with the one-tusker and with Kistulal's death.

Ruby Miranda was something to look forward to. The image of the Chandni-Chowk whore in the clinging ice-blue dress came flooding into his mind, evoking longings that had seemed almost to have ceased to exist; the woman with the flawless olive skin and the contours of the harem favourite, heavy-bosomed and narrow-hipped—the thought of her body so temptingly close at hand sent a delicious thrill through him.

'Just bring the coffee,' he said to the boy. 'Never mind the brandy.'

Henry slept very soundly that night, a dreamless easy sleep; for the first time since the death of his shikar.

14

Shiva walks with the Faithful

IT was not until a whole month later, in the middle of December, that Henry asked Ruby Miranda what she and her family had thought of his offer to give her a job.

She had come to the bungalow soon after dinner, slipping through the pantry entrance, and when it was time for her to go back to her cottage it had begun to rain. This was the second time in a week that it had begun to rain while Ruby Miranda was in Henry's bungalow; but then, in December, with the south-west monsoon fully set, you had to expect a certain amount of rain in the Assam hills.

Henry, pleasantly tired and sleepy, had cursed the rain. Instead of going to bed, he would have to busy himself setting up the camp-bed for Ruby Miranda in the gun-room. He did not like having any of his servants about when Ruby Miranda was in the house, and had already sent them off for the night. 'Must get the spare-room done up,' he told himself. 'Then it can rain all it likes.'

That was the occasion on which Henry had idly asked her what her family had thought of his offer of a job.

They were lying side by side on the carpet in front of the gun-room fire, and the only light in the room came from the red glow of the burning logs.

The gun-room leading off the side verandah was the only room in the bungalow which could be securely locked from inside; that was where the wall safe was, and Henry's guns and ammunition, and anything else that was worth locking up. It had a strong, teak-wood door and its windows were heavily barred. It was made for security; it was also made for privacy--the only room in the house that could be cut off from the world by closing just one door and sliding a bolt into place.

'Dad was all for it; it was Mum who raised the shindy,' said Ruby. She was leaning against the sofa, and the soft red light from the fire touching the contours of her body created a photographic

effect of lights and shadows; the light fell on the edge of her hair, like a halo, and the bridge of her nose and the round curve of her breasts. Her green and white polka-dot dress lay neatly folded on the back of the sofa behind her.

'Your mother didn't like the idea much, what?' asked Henry.

'No, Mum wanted me to stay right in the colony and get married. Give's a fag.'

Henry got up and switched on the light, knowing that as soon as the light came on Ruby would reach for her dress and cover herself with it. It always amused him to think that she could not bear to be seen naked in bright light.

He found the cigarettes and matches and switched off the light again and came and sat beside her. He gave her a cigarette and lit one himself.

'Ta,' said Ruby, inhaling deeply and exhaling the smoke through her nostrils. 'Ta muchly.'

Henry wished that Ruby wouldn't say things like 'ta muchly' or 'Give's a fag,' but he had not said anything to her about it, sensing that she would resent it. She was sensitive about her speech and accent, and was always trying to learn new words and phrases, and practising how to pronounce them correctly.

She lay back smoking, her eyes half-closed, and Henry watched her almost objectively, studying the light and shade effect of the pink fire-light on the honey-coloured body, picking out the contours, deepening the shadows. Outside, there were clouds and a howling wind and the patter of rain; but inside it was warm and dry and the only noise was the faint splutter of the logs of the fire.

'What was your mother's objection?' asked Henry.

'Mum said, "Don't go running after Englishmen; they don't marry, not the pucca ones. You stay right here in the colony, Roob-girl, find a husband for yourself".'

Henry felt uncomfortable when their talk veered towards the subject of marriage; it was odd how often Ruby Miranda seemed to bring the word 'marriage' into her conversation with him.

'Dad was far more reasonable. "Roob-girl's not going to find a husband," he told Mum, "she's going to become a schoolmistress and earn a hundred rupees a month. Let'er go." said Dad.'

Lying back on the deep Mirzapur rug in front of the fire in the gun-room of the manager's bungalow at Silent Hill, her limbs

bathed in the warmth of the fire, Ruby Miranda's thoughts went flying back to that day, nearly two months earlier, when Mr. Henderson, the station-master, had come to their house and told her father that she could get the job of schoolmistress at Silent Hill just for the asking.

It had caused a bitter, humiliating family quarrel later that evening, after Mr. Henderson had drunk his rum and gone away. She could see her father, grey and paunchy and bleary-eyed, sitting on the hardwood chair dressed in a torn singlet and soot-covered khaki shorts, his feet on the table before him, and the inevitable bottle of rum by his side. He had already finished nearly half the bottle, but of course Mr. Henderson had had several drinks out of it. Her mother was grinding the massala for the vindaloo, and the whole house was filled with the heady aroma of vinegar and garlic.

The quarrel had built up without warning; one moment they were all talking quite genially, and all of a sudden her father had lost his temper.

'You keep shut up!' he had yelled at her mother. 'You leave my Roob-girl alone. She's going to be a schoolmistress and earn money. You stop poking your nose in!'

'Achh!—schoolmistress! I know what kind of mistress,' her mother had answered contemptuously. 'You leave running after Englishmen, I tell you Roob.'

'Look oo's talking!' Mr. Miranda had said, laughing derisively and throwing his head back. 'Just look oo's talking. And my Roob-girl isn't running; the Englishmen's running after her, paying her good money. . . .'

'All you can think of is money, money, money!— money for your grog. You'll be willing to sell your family for your grog!' Ma had retorted.

'Shut up, stop shooting your . . . mouth,' her father had shouted. 'I could tell you some stories of people running after Englishmen, ha, ha . . . !'

'You dare to insult me in front of my children, you son of a Gurkha coolie woman!' Ma had flared up.

'Shut up, shut up, you Irish Tommy's spawn! You say one word more and I'll bash your bloody face!'

'So your father himself was quite in favour of your coming here?' Henry was asking.

'Oh, yes, quite in favour,' Ruby told him, obviously liking the new phrase.

'And in the end your mother said yes?'

'Yes,' said Ruby Miranda, looking blankly into the flames and thinking back to that evening. 'Yes, in the end Ma agreed.'

Ruby Miranda could never have brought herself to tell Henry why in the end her mother had agreed to her taking on the job; that it was all a sordid matter of rupees and annas. A grown-up girl was not much use in the house if she had to be fed and clothed; there were six other mouths to feed, and at times her mother had found it difficult to give them all even daal and rice twice a day. The Mirandas could not afford to turn down a salary of a hundred rupees a month.

'It's all due to his grog,' Ma Miranda had said as a parting shot. 'Otherwise my Roob-girl would not have to go and take a job. My bachhas can go without food, but your Dad's got to have his grog.'

But it wasn't the grog, either; you couldn't buy much rum at a rupee a bottle if you had to feed a family of seven on a hundred and fifty rupees a month.

Ruby looked at the raw-boned, heavily built Englishman lying naked beside her and gazing at her with half-closed eyes, the man of lust without love, who was merely seeking physical fulfilment and paying her a hundred rupees a month of the company's money for his private pleasure; and was asking about her family solicitously not because he was the least bit interested, but it was raining outside and he was making conversation, being polite because he was a well-brought-up Englishman. But of course, even if he had been genuinely interested, she could never have told it in all its detail to Henry - laid bare the raw, quivering poverty of the household; the unseemly, inevitable daily quarrels, the harsh, unwashed words flung at random, the keeping up of appearances on a hundred and fifty rupees a month.

She looked at Henry with bitterness and a touch of sudden anger, contrasting his life, untouched, as it seemed to her, by poverty or sordidness, with her own humiliating background. Lying beside her, spent and contented, gazing avidly at her naked body, he looked what he was, a man from another world.

'It was Eddie who was quite against my taking the job,' said Ruby. 'He was the one who protested to mother. ...'

Henry stiffened. 'Eddie?'

'Eddie Trevor. He was sweet on me—my, he was really jay!'

'Oh, the hockey chap.'

'Eddie was always jay; he didn't like anyone even to speak to me.'

The thought of a callow, loose-limbed Anglo-Indian youth with a bobbing Adam's apple being 'jay' of him was vaguely irritating.

'Was Trevor . . . er, very friendly with you?'

'Yes,' said Ruby dreamily, 'very friendly.'

'How friendly?' demanded Henry, not sounding casually curious any more, barely able to conceal his resentment.

'Eddie has always been in love with me, ever since he was a boy. He's always wanted to marry me,' Ruby said with a look of ecstasy on her face, 'marry me as soon as he got a job.'

Again, like a fly circling round a sore, their talk had come buzzing back to the subject of marriage.

'I'd better see about fixing the camp-cot for you,' said Henry rising. 'No, no, I'm not going to switch on the light.'

There was no question of telling a man like Henry Winton, who took his fun where he found it, her precise relationship with Eddie Trevor. He was almost certain to disapprove, unless, of course, he chose to laugh it off as a boy-and-girl crush, and somehow that would have been even worse. For it had been something far, far deeper and more precious, going beyond mere sex and a desire for female companionship, more earthy and more noble at the same time. Eddie loved her with a kind of fierce possessiveness that was almost pathological; no one else could understand it; it was intense, elemental, almost animal-like. At times, Ruby had found herself trembling with fear but also trembling even more with desire.

'The bloody English swine will give you a brat,' Eddie had said. Eddie never believed in mincing his words. 'He'll have all his fun and then the bugger'll drop you in the muck. That's what he's sending for you for, after coming and inspecting the whole lot of you railway colony girls at the gala. Schoolmistress, my arse!'

'No fear,' her father had said with a broad wink at Eddie. 'It's chum who'll catch the Englishman by his . . . and get him to marry her in the end. You trust my Roob-girl. She'll be a memsahib.'

Eddie had turned fiercely on her father. 'Marry her? Baah! You saw them at the gala. Did those two look the marrying kind?'

Marrying . . . ' and Eddie completed his sentence with a meaningful gesture.

It was her mother who had broken up the argument. 'You get a job, Eddie Trevor; then you can talk. You go here and there playing hockey, flighty as anything; then you want to run round with my Roob when you haven't a pie to your name—all you want is to spoil her name and keep all the other boys away. And then when my Roob girl is going to get a good job, you come poking your nose in. She's got a job now, not you; who are you to talk?'

Ma Miranda had lashed at Eddie's Achilles heel, knowing that it would hurt, and Eddie Trevor had turned red. He had stamped out of the house without saying a word.

Her mother's savage attack upon Eddie Trevor, on whom she had always doted, her father's coarse jollity, even their incessant bickering with each other, were again merely the symptoms, the bare, surface manifestations of a more deep-seated, more widely-spread cancer: the awareness of rootlessness, of not belonging, not being wanted, even of being despised in the teeming brown world of India. She could never have explained to Henry Winton the throbbing, compulsive craving of Anglo-India to seek living kinship with the West; the desperate, daily struggle of separation and alignment, the tight clutching of the tenuous, often imaginary strands of relationship with the sahibs, the constant vigilance against further assimilation with the smothering, enveloping peoples of the Indian soil. Above all, she could never have laid bare to any outsider her own personal dream of becoming some day a sahib's lady, going into the reserved, all-white clubs with her head held high, escorted by an Englishman without the slightest trace of coloured blood; of bearing blue-eyed, flaxen-haired children, of going to London for a dizzy round of the town and to gaze at the King himself; and then of settling down in a cool, antiseptic, wholly English suburb and washing away the contamination of India and Tinapur. No effort was too much for the fulfilment of that constant, aching dream, no sacrifice too great—not even the sacrifice of the love of a man like Eddie Trevor.

That was the sort of dream of which you spoke to no one at all, no matter how close you were to him; even if you knew that it was the secret, unspoken dream of Anglo-India itself. Only her mother had fathomed her secret thoughts, and in her way had tried to help; and only then had she realized with something of a

shock that there was nothing unusual in her mother's knowing about it, for her own private dream must once have been her mother's dream too.

'We're going to the bazaar, child,' said Mrs. Miranda to her a couple of days before she was to leave for Silent Hill. 'Don't wear anything posh; you know what the bazaar folk are. And don't say anything to your Pa.'

Ruby had worn her plain white dress that came well below her knees, and she did not say anything about the visit to her father. As soon as Mr. Miranda had eaten his tiffin and gone back to his loco-shed, Ruby's mother had called a tonga.

'Take us to Bichwa-baba,' she told the tonga-wallah.

The tonga went winding into the alleys of the city, crowded and narrow, but Mrs. Miranda seemed to know where she was going, and once, when the tonga-driver himself was not sure which way to go, it was she who told him.

Ruby Miranda sat in the tonga slightly shocked and excited. She had heard of Bichwa-baba, of course, as almost everyone in Tinapur had, and seen photographs of him. He was said to be more than a hundred years old, and a very holy man: he could read your thoughts and he could give you a wish-fulfilment charm that never failed— at least, that is what the Hindu boys and girls in the railway colony school had always asserted. What Ruby had not known was that her mother, a devout Catholic, was also a disciple of the Baba.

Their tonga came to a halt in front of a grey stone archway, and Ruby's mother told the driver to wait. They walked through the archway into a wide, cobble-stoned courtyard. In the far corner was a square, bricked-up platform surrounding a peepul tree. Under this tree sat a man covered in ashes, and naked except for his loin cloth. Even before they came close to the platform, Ruby had recognized him as Bichwa-baba.

He was sitting on a tiger skin spread out on the platform, his legs folded under him. For a man who was reputed to be over a hundred years old, his body was surprisingly firm and youthful, and his beard, glossy and well-oiled, was without a trace of grey. Only his hair was unkempt and thickly matted, as though plastered with a hard glue, and it was piled up on top of his head in a solid bun. His eyes were tightly closed.

Mrs. Miranda removed her shoes before climbing up the steps of the platform. She went up on tiptoe, as though afraid to disturb the Baba's meditations, clutching the bunch of flowers and the bundle of joss-sticks she had brought with her. On the platform, she lit the joss-sticks and stuck them in a sand-filled bowl kept there for the purpose, and placed the flowers at the Baba's feet. After that she opened her purse and took out a silver rupee which she placed on the tiger skin. Then she came down, walking backwards, step by step, and stood beside her daughter with folded hands. The air was already filling with the strong scent given by the burning joss-sticks.

'Shiva walks with men,' Bichwa-baba pronounced in a deep, booming voice. 'God walks with men and women; only they have not the faith to see.'

He opened his eyes and looked at the two women. Then he picked up his bead chain from near his feet and began counting the beads, his lips moving all the time, without making a sound.

'The lady has no wish for herself,' said Bichwa-baba. 'Mother love brings her here.'

Mrs. Miranda's eyes shone with pleasure. 'Yes, Bichwa-baba maharaj,' she said. 'The child stands at your feet.'

'Shiva walks with the faithful,' said Bichwa-baba. 'God stands beside those who have faith. What is thy wish?'

Mother and daughter looked at each other, but they did not speak; both were conscious of a feeling of inadequacy and guilt. You could not put thoughts such as theirs into words, not even before a man of God.

Bichwa-baba closed his eyes once again and picked up his bead chain and began to mumble to himself.

'I see a man, a white man,' he said in a very soft voice. 'Far away and not so far away; light-eyed and light-haired.'

Somewhere, far away, a temple bell was clanging, and the air was heavy with the joss-stick smoke. Both mother and daughter stood with bowed heads.

'Come forward,' Bichwa-baba called.

'Take off your shoes, dear,' whispered Mrs. Miranda.

After Ruby had removed her shoes, Mrs. Miranda led her up the steps to the platform.

Bichwa-baba picked up the coin that had been placed at his feet and held it high in the air. 'Money is illusion,' he pronounced, and

once again his voice was loud and clear. 'Money is dust, less than dust.'

Even as they watched, the coin had vanished.

He closed his eyes tightly and began to mumble a prayer. Then he held up his right hand and made a swipe through the air as though to catch some insect, and both Ruby and her mother saw that he now held a tiny white paper packet in his hand.

'Power is his who has faith,' he said. 'Come forward, my child; hold out your hands.'

Mrs. Miranda nudged her daughter, and Ruby knelt down before the holy man with outstretched hands, palms upwards.

'On days when the moon is bright, prepare something by thine own hands . . . Be it drink or food . . . Mix this powder . . . only a few grains at a time . . . Make the man of your heart partake of it.'

The thin paper packet fell neatly into Ruby's open palms.

Bichwa-baba's voice had once again dropped to a whisper, and Ruby had to lean forward to hear what he was saying.

'Only when the moon is bright . . . It may take many, many moons . . . the man who can resist this love potion does not live. . . '

'What does it mean, Bichwa-baba? What does it mean?' Ruby asked, suddenly frightened.

'The ways of Shiva are mysterious,' whispered the Baba, but he had become almost totally inaudible.

'Come, my child,' said Mrs. Miranda tenderly, pulling her daughter's arm. 'Don't ask too many questions. It will work; I know.'

And Ruby Miranda had looked at her mother, shocked, for in that instant, she had realized that her mother too had once come to the Baba with a similar wish and had been given the same powder. Almost with a sense of personal guilt, she dragged her eyes away from her mother's face, shining and starry-eyed, knowing that whoever it was for whom her mother had come to the Bichwa-baba for his love potion, it could not have been her father.

Ruby Miranda could never have brought herself to speak to anyone of that visit.

The ridiculous, fairy-tale wonder of it was that it had worked; Bichwa-baba's holy powders had worked like magic, just as her mother had assured her they would. For two whole weeks after

she had come to Silent Hill, Henry Winton had barely looked at her. Was she mistaken then? she had asked herself. Was there nothing more to Henry Winton's offer of a job than the need of an extra teacher in his garden school? Could she have been wrong about the way he had looked at her at the railway institute gala, following her with his eyes all the evening and causing Eddie Trevor to be so jealous? Above all, could her mother too be wrong?

She had gone about her work, knowing that she was not popular with the other staff at the garden, thankful that she had a neat two-roomed cottage to herself close to the school house where she could get away as soon as school ended; and yet resenting the fact that she was forced to spend the long, lonely evenings there all by herself, day after day, feeling increasingly bewildered and frustrated. After the heady pace of the railway colony, the daily games of badminton and the long motor-cycle rides with Eddie Trevor, the weekly dances at the institute at which she was the most sought after partner, the gossip of the colony, the long, late-night sing-songs beside the reservoir, the Sunday gatherings in the church grounds, she was finding the new life altogether dull and meaningless.

Then, on a bright, moonlit night, she had made the lemon tarts, with just a few grains of Bichwa-baba's powders mixed in the lemon-curd, and had sent them off to Henry's bungalow. And after that she had lain awake most of the night trembling with nervousness lest he should take it amiss--you never knew how an Englishman would react to such a typically Indian gesture.

The very next morning, Henry had sent a man telling her to call at his office with the school's inspector's report. Oh, he had been so polite and charming at that meeting, just as though he were speaking to a visiting manager's wife.

And now, only another moon later, it had become almost routine for her to come to his bungalow after dinner. He saw to it that there were no servants in the bungalow itself; but in their quarters nearby they were still up and about, and of course they knew all about her visits to the sahib. Henry's servants, and indeed the staff of the Silent Hill tea estate, had begun to treat her with a new respect; it was almost as though she were the memsahib, and once, when Henry had lost his temper with one of the supervisors, the head boy came to her, pleading on his behalf to put in a word with the sahib.

At the same time, Ruby could not help feeling vaguely disturbed by the thought that their relationship had come to a sort of standstill. In many ways, he was still formal and guarded, as though anxious to underline the fact that neither of them had any claims upon the other except those of expediency. He had never offered to visit her in her cottage even though the cottage was just as secluded as his bungalow. Once she had suggested that he should have a meal in her cottage, but Henry had not been encouraging. Once or twice she had offered to help him out with the running of his household, but he had brushed aside the idea quite firmly. He did not so much as let her make a cup of tea or an omelette when they felt hungry, as they sometimes did, late at night; instead, he always preferred to open a bottle of beer and bring out cheese and biscuits to go with it.

He was a strange, complex man, Ruby thought, not downright and open like Eddie Trevor; and at times she wondered to herself how she would ever get used to the idea of forsaking Eddie for Henry Winton. In the privacy of the gun-room, he made love to her with a searing intensity; possessive, demanding, and at the same time willing to abandon himself completely to her, readily giving in to her own passions; and yet, whenever he met her outside, he was excessively cool and formal. Eddie could never be like that. Eddie had always been natural; frank and earthy, always uninhibited in his talk and behaviour, and if his ways were at times embarrassing, his language coarse, she could at least understand him perfectly. Henry, on the other hand, was an enigma; he behaved as though he were secretly in love with someone else, and yet, so far as she could see, there was no other woman in his life. Her whole system cried out for a different kind of love; to lift their relationship from a hole-and-corner affair of passion to the sphere of love. After their long hours before the fire in the evenings, after all that passionate, blind intimacy, their total surrender to each other, Ruby could not help wondering why he had not asked her to marry him. She would make him a good wife, Ruby thought, even if she never succeeded in putting Eddie Trevor out of her mind.

In fact, until that evening, Henry had never shown the slightest interest in her life apart from their life together. As such, that evening when it had begun to rain while she was in his bungalow and he had asked her about her family and how they had reacted

to his offer to her of a job, Ruby had felt a faint surge of hope in her heart.

'Oh, God, please, please make him fall in love with me; please, please make him propose to me,' she said to herself, and she pictured herself standing in front of Bichwa-baba's peepul tree with folded hands, and she could almost smell the smothering heavy-scented fumes rising out of the joss-stick bowl and hear the din of the *pooja* bells in some temple in the distance. 'Please,' she entreated the Baba with all the reverence she was capable of, 'oh, please!'

'I'm afraid I'll just have to put on the light,' Henry said from the doorway, and laughed when he saw her make a grab for the dress she had once again folded neatly and put on the sofa. He switched on the light and came in carrying a canvas camp-bed. He put the bed down along the wall and went out again and came back a few minutes later, carrying sheets and pillows and blankets.

'I was thinking of getting the guest-room done up,' he said, 'so you won't have to sleep on a camp-cot every time you're . . . er, caught by the rain and have to spend the night here.'

'That would be great!' Ruby exclaimed, clutching desperately at his words 'Really nice! But won't it cost an awful lot of money?'

'The Brindian Company will pay,' said Henry laughing, and then he said, 'Oh!' He stood in the doorway, staring at her, holding the sheets and blankets in his hands. She had flung her dress over the back of the sofa and was lying stark naked; and she was smiling at him and her eyes were dreamy and half-closed.

'I see you've got over your objection to strong light,' said Henry.

Ruby went on smiling, biting her lower lip, and closed her eyes completely. Then she held out her arm to him in a gesture of invitation. He dropped the bed-clothes he was carrying and came and sat beside her, and he had to bend very low to hear what she was saying: 'Don't you think you'd better switch off the light, first, darling?' whispered Ruby. 'Please.'

15

Off for the Holidays

'H A V E you put out the wine glasses?' Henry asked the head boy

'Jee, sahib '

And the chocolates?'

'Jee, sahib '

'Then bring me another whisky-and soda '

He sat in front of the sitting-room fire, wearing his grey chalk striped suit and fingering his dark-blue tie with the white and blue stars. The tie was rich, heavy and silk lined. It bore a 'Sulka' label and it was obviously outrageously expensive. Jean Walters had sent him the tie from England for Christmas. Odd that she should have thought of sending him a present, thought Henry.

It was three days before Christmas, and Henry was due to leave for Calcutta the next morning for his holidays. Ruby Miranda was going to Tinapur, and they were going to have their Christmas dinner together that night, three days in advance. Ruby had offered to bring some special chicken vindaloo which she was going to cook, and Henry had sent for a bottle of the Highlands Club's best champagne to go with it.

He had just ordered his second chota-peg when the head boy came and told him that Jugal Kishore babu was waiting to see him.

'He hasn't got the woman with him, this time, has he?' he asked in a tone of irritation.

'No, sahib '

Tell him to wait in the verandah,' said Henry, and bring me the chota-peg '

That was one major hurdle he would have to overcome some time soon. Henry had still not got hold of anything concrete that he could use as an excuse for dismissing Jugal Kishore. Jugal Kishore had been in the company's service for fifteen years and now held a fairly responsible appointment, that of chief stockman. Before you could get rid of someone with so much seniority in the company's service, you had to have something tangible against him. Henry

had discovered that many of the labourers in the garden were in the habit of paying him a rupee on every pay-day for his services to the Council of Labour which was supposed to represent their grievances before the management. That must have brought him every month at least another two hundred rupees above his pay. Of late, he had even begun to dabble in politics and had got many of the coolies to listen to political speeches down in the valley. Perhaps that would provide the handle he was seeking—politics.

When Henry came out, he was somewhat startled to see that Jugal Kishore was not wearing his usual grey suit and brown pill-box cap, but a short grey jacket closed at the neck over a knee-length white shirt. In place of trousers, he wore tight, many-folded churidar pyjamas; and instead of the brown pill-box cap, a snow-white khaddar cap.

Jugal Kishore folded his hands and said, 'Good evening, sir.'

'Yes?' said Henry, frowning.

'Mr. Winton, this time I have not come to ask you a favour,' Jugal Kishore said very coldly. This was the first time any Indian on the garden had addressed him as Mr. Winton. They had always called him Winton sahib.

'What do you want?'

'You were rude to me the last time I came to your house, Mr. Winton, and you insulted my niece. But that time I had a favour to ask. Now you are being rude to me again merely because I happen to be a subordinate . . . subordinate and an Indian.'

'Look, I haven't got the whole evening to stand here.'

'No; sahib has got more . . . er, more important business to attend to,' Jugal Kishore said with a knowing smile. 'But my visit is important too, in its way. I have come to give you good news.'

'Good news?'

'Yes, I'm leaving my job—resigning.'

'You're what?' asked Henry, hardly believing what he had heard.

'I told you, Mr. Winton, that I came to give you welcome news. There was no need to be rude.'

'I won't pretend it isn't. We can't have trouble-mongers here, getting a rake-off from the unfortunate coolies—people who even stoop to lodge false complaints with the police.'

'We all have our failings, Mr. Winton. Your failing is that you cannot bear Indians; yet your tragedy is that you are doomed to

work in this country. You cannot even tolerate the idea of having an Indian mistress . . . a full-blooded Indian mistress.'

'Will you leave this house at once!—before I have you thrown out?'

'Mr. Winton, just as you would not go out hunting an elephant without a proper gun, I would never dare to come into an Englishman's house to talk to him on equal terms unless I were adequately armed. You have insulted me quite enough; you have humiliated my niece; called her a thief in the hearing of your servants—your low-born menials. It is so easy to be rude to someone who cannot be rude to you, Mr. Winton.'

'Clear out of here, or I will have you thrown out!'

'That is the typical British reaction to any difficult situation, isn't it?—throw out the person who disagrees with you. You live in India, eating the profits of the land, and keep throwing out the Indians themselves. Well, not for long, Mr. Winton; not for long.'

Henry clenched his fists and came very close to Jugal Kishore.

'Get out, you swine! Get out, this minute!' he muttered.

'Ha-ha!' Jugal Kishore laughed derisively, showing his crooked, paan-stained teeth and squinting his puffy eyes. But he stood his ground. 'Why don't you shout, Winton? Because you don't know exactly what ammunition I have got to fight you with. Because you are secretly afraid. You may be the manager of this garden, Winton, but I can tell you that neither you nor anyone else can throw me out—do you hear that?—no one. If that happens, I can get all the labourers to strike work. Would you care to risk that, Winton? Then you'll know the real power of labour, once and for all. Why don't you hit me, Winton, why? Why?'

'Because you're not worth it. I know your game. You want to provoke me into hitting you so that you can raise a hue and cry about it. You are too terrified to come out and hit back, and too cowardly; all you Indians. Your Gandhis and everyone. You always want the other man to hit you so that you can whine and show your bruises to the world and go on shouting: Hit me, hit me again! You disgust me!'

'Your days are over, Winton; people like yourself and that lecherous dog, Jeffrey Dart—Sir Jeffrey Dart—ha-ha!'

'Don't push me too far; I'll really kill you, you bloody swine!' said Henry, trembling with rage.

'I am not Kistulal, Winton; I am not someone you can push in

front of an elephant and run away and save your own hide—and then come out and offer to hit an old man like me.'

'Boyl' Henry shouted. 'B O Y !'

'If you think there is a single man on Silent Hill, a single Indian, who would lay a hand on me, you are mistaken. They may not all be my followers, but they know what will happen to them if they lay a hand on me. They have to live in this country and take their punishment. They are not going to pack up and run away one day like all you Englishmen!'

'The English will never leave this country,' shouted Henry, 'never!'

'Oh yes they will; and it is people like me who will make them. That is why I am resigning, to hasten the process. I am contesting a by-election to the Assembly backed by all the labour unions, supported by the Congress. . . .'

'God help India if people like you are to be elected to assemblies. You are crooked, without a spark of decency, corrupt, and . . . and quite immoral, why, you even offered to get me interested in your niece. With what face can anyone who would stoop as low as you go before the people and . . .'

'With the same face as you who go about calling yourself a hunter and a white man.'

'I don't want to hear another word from you ' Henry turned on his heel.

'Yes, run away; run away, that's the best thing you can do.' His arrogant, derisive laughter, loud and defiant, followed Henry Winston right into his sitting room 'You'll all be running away soon, all you Englishmen!' yelled Jubal Kishore from the verandah.

16

Being given to understand

THE New Year came, as in any other year, with the singing of *Auld Lang Syne* and drinking champagne and kissing all the women within reach. No one could have known that it was a very special new year. A gate was clanging shut; henceforward, they would tend to talk of time as the years before 1939 and the years after 1939.

From a third floor window of the Grand Hotel in Calcutta, the hill-top tea-garden called Silent Hill seemed diminutive and remote, like something viewed through the wrong end of a telescope, its problems insignificant, its Caesar a strutting pygmy. Calcutta was immense, gay, noisy, heady; the races were on, and polo teams had come from Kashmir and Jaipur. Firpo's, the Great Eastern, the Three Hundred, all had their special attractions.

But the gaiety of Calcutta had, for Henry Winton, a dry and brittle quality; the gaiety of too much drinking, too many late nights, too much money spent on parties and theatres and at the races. From the very day of his arrival, Henry had longed to get back to his bungalow at Silent Hill and to Ruby Miranda; and indeed, if it had not been for the fact that she herself had gone to Tinapur for the holidays, he would have cut short his own visit to Calcutta and gone back to Silent Hill. She had been wonderful that night, so sympathetic and so uncurious; so full of understanding, so eager to please, to anticipate his slightest wish, so submissive to his demands.

She had come into his bungalow only a few minutes after Jugal Kishore had gone away, and this time she had come through the main door, held open for her by the head boy, bowing and smiling, and Henry had come out into the passage to receive her. And this time they had sat in the wide, bay-windowed, high-ceilinged sitting-room with the rough, cobble-stone fire-place and Henry's hunting trophies hung up on the walls; not in the sneaking, behind-closed-doors seclusion of the gun-room. Henry had offered her a sherry

and they had sat down on opposite chairs in front of the log fire, with Herman the retriever lying down on the rug between them exactly as though they were man and wife.

But as soon as Henry had sat down, his thoughts had gone whipping back to the mood of helpless rage brought on by Jugal Kishore's visit. Jugal Kishore's defiant and rude laughter, his burning, arrogant words crowded Henry's mind, making him feel hot with shame. Was it just a shot in the dark, or did Jugal Kishore really know something about the way Kistulal had died? he wondered. He must remember to ask Cockburn the next time he met him. Perhaps his man had been talking, or had gone back nosing again and had found the missing cartridge and had passed it on to Jugal Kishore. The thought of that cartridge brought on a crawling sensation of fear at the back of his neck. How much real knowledge did Jugal Kishore possess?

Ruby Miranda must have sensed that he was upset. She sat in the opposite chair, sipping her sherry and smoking, not talking much or expecting to be talked to, and getting up now and then only to re-fill Henry's glass. After a while, she had gone over to the gramophone and put on some of the records she had brought with her. And after that she had gone on sitting, smoking cigarettes and tapping her toes to the music. demure and chaste, fitting snugly into the picture of fire-side domesticity. She was wearing a new dress of flame-coloured silk, fully draped yet low-cut, not too daring and yet showing off her figure to perfection.

'You're looking wonderful this evening,' said Henry.

'Thanks.'

Even at the time, Henry remembered thinking that she no longer said 'tanks' instead of 'thanks'. 'That's quite a dress,' he said in compliment.

'I was wondering when you were going to notice. I made it myself, from a Hall and Anderson pattern. Would you like to dance?' she asked. She got up and stood over him, tall and dark and perfumed, holding out her arms. The gramophone was playing a tune called *I'm in Heaven*.

'I am not much of a dancer,' said Henry, putting down his glass.

'Don't hold me so far off. That's better. I like your tie. New?'

'Yes,' said Henry. 'A Christmas present. It's easy to dance with you.'

'That's because you're not holding me too far away,' she said matter-of-factly.

She was humming the tune as they danced, and her eyes were half-closed. 'I'm in heaven,' she was repeating, 'I'm in heaven, dancing cheek to cheek.'

After the record finished, she made Henry stand in the middle of the floor, near the open-mouthed-tiger rug, and put on another record. They had danced, keeping to a corner of the room, on the polished teakwood floor, for nearly an hour, only pausing to change the records, and in that time she had gently stroked his mood back to something close to what it had been before Jugal Kishore had come that evening. Afterwards, they had had dinner by candlelight, and they had drunk champagne, toasting each other solemnly. She coaxed him to eat, not eating much herself, and he thought her chicken vindaloo delicious, zesty without being hot.

'You're a wonderful person,' Henry told her very sincerely.

That night she had not gone back to her cottage although it was not raining; nor had she slept on the camp-bed brought into the gun-room. She had lain in Henry's bed, pillowing his head against her breast, until he had fallen asleep.

That was how he remembered Ruby Miranda; and that was the woman he now longed with all his being to get back to; the rare mixture of the submissiveness and surrender of oriental womanhood with the freedom and gaiety of the West, and of course the breath-taking figure and good looks and colouring which had been a gift of both the West and the East. She was not the kind of woman who analysed your shortcomings; Ruby Miranda was content with him the way he was, even prepared to sacrifice the love of her childhood sweetheart for him.

In Calcutta, he spent a whole morning selecting a present for her, and in the end he chose a pair of sapphire and gold ear-clips from Hamiltons. They were terribly expensive; but he wanted to buy an expensive present for her, and he thought the ear-clips would go specially well with her dark, almost Spanish face. He also bought her two pairs of the most expensive flesh-coloured silk stockings that Hall and Andersons had. After that he bought the furnishings for the spare-room, still with Ruby Miranda in his mind. In the New Market, he hunted round a dozen shops before he got the carpet and curtains that he thought would make the correct setting for her. The carpet was light green and made in

Kalimpong; the curtains were made of handloom material, and hand-painted: light green sprigs on an orange background. For the bed itself, he bought a deep, sponge-rubber mattress. And all the time he was on the train going back, he kept building pictures of Ruby Miranda wearing the ear-clips and the stockings, Ruby Miranda lying on the Kalimpong rug and wearing only the ear-clips, Ruby Miranda on the sponge-rubber mattress holding out her arms to him.

'Oh, it's great - I mean wonderful!' Ruby exclaimed when he led her into the spare-room. She was wearing the same flame-coloured dress she had worn the last time she had come. She also wore her new flesh-coloured stockings which he had had sent to her in the morning. She had never looked more beautiful, he thought, as she turned to face him, her eyes shining with excitement.

'So now you will have a special room to yourself; whenever you are here and it rains,' he told her. 'What do you think of the curtains? I had your orange dress in mind when I chose them.'

He helped to unhook the dress while she held up her arms and contracted her body, and she wriggled out of it and put it carefully draped on the back of the bedside chair. She wore no slip or brassière. The stockings too were peeled off, straightened, and thrown on the arm of the chair. And finally the brief, lace-edged cotton knickers - but before that he had to go and switch off the lights.

Ruby lay back on the sponge-rubber mattress, shining black hair and light-brown limbs, just as he had pictured her in his mind, rounding off the new decorations of the spare-room, lying on the white sheets naked and desirable and desiring, her hands folded behind her head and smiling at him with half-closed eyes in token of her surrender.

'Close your eyes,' he said to her, 'and don't open them till I tell you.' Then he held out, opened, the small velvet box from Hamilton's. In the dim glow of the log fire, the sapphires sparkled like two fire-flies. 'Now!'

Ruby opened her eyes and blinked and gave a sudden startled cry of pleasure, but she did not say anything. It took Henry some time to realize that she was crying. And he could not understand what she could be crying about.

The next morning, when Henry walked into his office after his daily round of inspection, he thought he had the answer. On his table lay an application from Eddie Trevor. Trevor wanted to be considered for the job of the chief stockman which had just become vacant as the result of Jugal Kishore's resignation.

'Bloody cheek!' Henry exclaimed, with a sudden sharp stab of jealousy. 'Bloody cheek!' Henry read:

Being given to understand, that a vacancy for the post of chief stockman . . .

That was the set formula for an application for a job. 'The damned nerve' Henry said, as he flung the application to one side.

So Eddie Trevor had decided to follow Ruby Miranda to Silent Hill. 'He has always been in love with me,' he remembered Ruby Miranda's telling him. 'Eddie wants to marry me as soon as he gets a job.'

And Trevor was expecting him, Henry Winton, to provide the job; so that they could get married!

He could almost picture the spare, athletic figure, gawky and yet full of assurance, the deep-set, sharp black eyes, the loping easy walk like that of some feline animal, the incredible speed and stamina, the hair-trigger reflexes; the man accustomed to dominating a packed hockey game. And he could see another Eddie, the master of ceremonies at a gala, in the tight-fitting, shoddy coat with the heavily padded shoulders calling out in a singsong voice, 'All the nines, ninety-nine, Kelly's eye, number one!'

And then, cutting into his thoughts like an ice-pick had come the horrible suspicion: had Ruby Miranda told him to apply for the job?

She had gone to Tinapur for the holidays and must have seen a lot of Trevor. Had she told him to send the application? Otherwise it would have been too much of a coincidence. Jugal Kishore had left the job only a day before Henry had left for Calcutta. Trevor could not possibly have known anything about it unless someone had told him.

Who? Ruby Miranda? And did that mean she wanted Trevor to come and live at Silent Hill?

The thought went spiralling round and round in his mind, touching upon things she had said or done or avoided saying.

lighting up odd dark corners. So that was the reason she had burst into sobs the previous evening.

There was, of course, no question of giving the job to Trevor. The automatic choice for Jugal Kishore's post as chief stockman was his assistant, a man called Patiram. Patiram had been in the company's service for seven or eight years, and was already a permanent employee. He was a meek, hard-working, retiring sort of man, and it was high time he was promoted; in any event, there was no question of bringing in an outsider over his head. If a new man had to be taken on in the stores department, he would have to be started on daily wages, just like an ordinary, part-time coolie. And then, only if he was found hard-working and honest, promoted to the post of an assistant storekeeper, perhaps after a year's service. If Trevor wanted a job in Henry's garden, that was how he would have to make a start— as a daily-wage coolie.

And somehow, the thought of equating Trevor to a part-time coolie had brought on a cooling sense of satisfaction.

Henry picked up Trevor's application again. There were several testimonials and newspaper clippings attached to it. He did not seem to have matriculated, though, Henry noticed—otherwise the matriculation certificate would almost certainly have been there. His chief glory, of course, was that he had played centre forward in the provincial hockey team and had gone to Berlin with the Olympic hockey team. The paper clippings had glowing headlines describing his prowess in some crucial match or the other, and some of them had photographs of him.

"The nerve!" said Henry aloud, 'daring to send me all this bumph!"

He was just about to toss the papers into his OUT tray when something familiar in the numerous testimonials caught his eye. He picked up the papers again and turned them over carefully. His chilling suspicion was correct. There was a testimonial which was written on Brindian head office stationery, and it bore the florid signature of Sir Jeffrey Dart. It was extraordinary how magnanimous Sudden could be when caught in the right mood.

Towards five in the evening, his chaprassy came in with a visiting card. It seemed Mr. John G. Trevor was waiting to see him.

Henry looked at the yellowing card carefully, thinking of the man he had seen in Sudden's house, helping himself to Sudden's

cigars. It was clear that the card had been used before, for there were signs of some pencil writing having been rubbed off from one corner. It confirmed that Mr. John G. Trevor was the ex-head watchman of the Pagoda Dale tea estate, and also announced that he now resided in the second lane of the railway colony at Tinapur.

'Ask Trevor to come in,' said Henry.

John G. Trevor came in, holding his thick, quilted sola topee in his hands and making deep bows at each step, small and withered and round-faced, like a backroom character out of Kipling, but shifty-eyed and ingratiatingly courteous.

Henry kept him standing. Mr. Trevor stood some distance away from his table, blinking his watery eyes and twirling his topee.

'Yes?' Henry asked.

'I have come in connection with my son's application for the job of chief stockman, sir.'

'I thought as much.'

'My son has gone to Bombay, sir, for the Aga Khan hockey tournaments, sir,' old Mr. Trevor said. 'I'm sorry he could not present the application himself.'

'It's a pity you have taken all the trouble to come here,' Trevor said Henry. 'But I must find there's no chance of that job' going to an outsider.'

'He is not an outsider, sir. I have worked thirty years for the company.'

'As far as I am concerned, he's an outsider. Your service to the company makes no difference. It would'

But, sir.

'Please don't interrupt me. It would have made no difference whatsoever even if your son had been able to see me. These senior posts are usually filled by promoting someone already in the service of the company. It is a policy matter. You should know that.'

But, sir, I have a letter here from Sir Jeffrey Dart. I hope your honour will have the goodness to consider'

'Let me see?' said Henry, putting out his hand.

John G. Trevor fished a letter out of his pocket. He handed it to Henry and stood back nervously, blinking his eyes and twirling his hat.

Sudden had written on the semi-official stationery of the head office at Chinnar

My dear Winton,

This will introduce John Trevor who used to work under me three years ago. It seems his son has applied for some job in your garden. I know the young man; he's a brilliant sportsman. Please see what you can do for Mr. Trevor.

Henry frowned. 'I wish you hadn't gone to the trouble of going to Chinnar to get this recommendation. I'm sure if Sir Jeffrey had known what job your son was applying for, he would never have agreed to give you a letter of recommendation. For that matter, I cannot imagine how you or your son could have discovered that there was a vacancy here --most odd! But I must make it clear that I strongly disapprove of such . . . er, such backdoor methods. I am sorry.'

'But begging your pardon, sir, Sir Jeffrey assured me that you would do the needful, sir, after you had read the letter. . . .'

'I am not prepared to hear anything more about this, Trevor. I shall speak to Sir Jeffrey next time I go to Chinnar. In the meantime, I should advise your son to seek employment elsewhere. He will not be getting this job. That's all. You have my permission to leave.'

It was an odd, typically Indian politeness. Whenever you wanted to signify that an interview was over, all you had to say was that the other man had your permission to leave. It was as easy as that.

John G. Trevor stood uncertainly for a moment, and then shuffled wearily out of the room, bowing as he went.

17

The Thin Line

AFTERWARDS, Henry could never think of that interview with Sudden without experiencing a hot, futile rage. Sudden was like a rock, quite impervious to reasoning; as always, Sudden was also something like a God, looking down from a pedestal.

'It has always been the policy to prefer the company's own men to outsiders,' Henry reminded him.

'We cannot very well consider the son of a man who has served the company for over thirty years an outsider,' stated Sudden. 'And remember, policy has to be flexible; a rigid, inflexible policy is the hall-mark of bad management.'

You could not talk common sense to an oracle, but Henry persisted.

'I don't think Trevor will have any idea of the work.'

'None of us has, Henry, when we begin. We all learn as we go along.'

'There's bound to be a good deal of resentment in the permanent staff, sir. Indeed, we cannot altogether rule out the possibility of some kind of a demonstration.'

'No coolies have ever demonstrated against the Brindian Company. We just can't have that. My instructions to my managers are quite clear about any collective demonstrations, any threat of a strike: ruthlessness! The time to put down a strike is before it starts.'

'This is going to lead to a lot of criticism from the Indians, sir.'

'In India, whatever we do will cause comment. The Englishman will always be sniped at, no matter what he does. We cannot afford to show fear of Indian opinion.'

He was surprised at Sudden's truculence, and for a moment he was swept by a wave of anger and resentment against Sudden for disturbing his own self-confidence.

'You have nothing personal against this man Trevor, have you, Henry?' Sudden inquired.

'No, sir, nothing personal.'

'Good! Then I hope you will try and look after him; give him all the guidance and help you can. Don't take any notice of what your men tell you; it's up to us to run the company's gardens. Personally, I should have thought it would be quite an asset to have an international hockey player on your staff.'

'I do wish he had at least the minimum qualifications for the job, sir,' said Henry weakly.

'We have to make exceptions, now and then. Your headmistress cannot by any means be said to have the minimum qualifications for her job.'

Henry winced, sensing defeat. One could never be sure just how much Sudden knew about oneself, although one did know that he had his special informants in all the gardens.

'Henry,' said Sudden, 'you as the manager have certain specific powers; for instance, to fill all vacancies up to one hundred rupees a month, besides things like schools and recreation facilities and amenities and canteens and all that. These things are your pigeon entirely, and I don't normally go asking managers what they do in these matters which lie within their powers . . .'

'Actually,' Henry interrupted, 'if I had to take on a man like Trevor, sir, I would have engaged him on less than a hundred rupees in the first instance; as a daily-wage coolie.'

'As a coolie?'

'Yes, sir.'

For a moment a startled expression came over Sudden's features, followed by a quick flush of anger. Then he leaned forward in his chair, fixing Henry with his gaze, and spoke slowly and forcefully.

'Sometimes, Henry, I don't know whether you act as you do because you don't know any better or because you deliberately wish to create difficulties.'

'I was only trying to recommend whatever was in the best interests of the company according to my lights, Sir Jeffrey.'

'Then I would ask you to be guided by my lights. I am telling you to take on Mr. Trevor as your chief stockman in place of Jugal Kishore. I am also telling you to see that he makes a success of his job. Is that clear?'

'Quite clear.'

'I would also like to give you a piece of advice, Henry. I shouldn't get too deeply involved with any of the local girls; that's

something all of us have to guard against. Have your fun, by all means, but if you cannot see the thin line that separates fun from serious involvement- well, it's just as well to give up the game.'

The day after Henry returned from his week-end visit to Chinnar a deputation of labour leaders came to see him in his office. There were six men and one woman. After he had called them in, they all stood up, solemn and unsmiling, shifting their feet uncomfortably and avoiding his eyes.

Henry knew them all by name. They were already down on his 'black list' as being those most closely associated with Jugal Kishore's Council of Labour.

'What is it, Mahipat?' he asked the man nearest to him.

Mahipat stiffly handed him a paper. It was a formal notice of their intention to go on strike if an unqualified outsider was brought in as the new chief stockman.

Henry read through the notice carefully, trying to think how Sudden would have handled such a situation. The notice bore the unmistakable stamp of Jugal Kishore's draftsmanship. So this was the long-threatened strike. At last Jugal Kishore had found a concrete reason for putting his new weapon to the test. As ironic, Henry thought, that he would now be having to propose his own workers to fight for Eddie Trevor.

He scowled and threw the paper on to his table with a gesture of disdain. He decided to keep his visitors standing; this was no time for the velvet glove.

'Your pay will be stopped, from this moment,' he said to them.

'All we want is justice,' said Mahipat fidgeting. 'Our demand is quite reasonable.'

'Any demand which contains an ultimatum is not reasonable,' he retorted. 'You cannot threaten a company like the Brindian Tea Company, a British company, and get away with it.'

'Labourers have a right to present their grievances,' said Mahipat. 'In Bilayat they were given the right to form labour unions many years ago. Labour people have even been in the government. Here all we ask for is justice. One of our own men is being superseded. That is wrong.'

It was astonishing how they were taught to repeat, parrot-like, the privileges enjoyed by the workers in other countries. Even Henry himself had little idea of the course of the labour movement

in his own country; and yet his Indian coolies seemed to know all about it.

'You are a sensible man, Mahipat, a family man. Do you want to lose your job just because the company has employed an outsider in some other department? You do not know the reason behind these appointments. The company has its own reasons.'

'We have to stand up for our rights, all of us together.'

Henry tried a shot in the dark. 'Do you want to see your women and children starve?—thrown out into the cold just because just because Jugal Kishore tells you to go on strike?'

'Jugal Kishore-babu is our friend, sahib. He knows the law. He will get us our rights, in the end.'

'Now you get right back to work, and don't let me hear another word about a strike. You will not only lose your jobs here, but none of the other tea companies in Assam will take you on.'

'So Trevor sahib is coming here?'

'He is definitely coming here; and he is going to remain here,' said Henry, surprised at his own vehemence in support of Eddie Trevor. but then this was a fight against Jugal Kishore who had come out in the open at last, brandishing this new weapon with which he had always threatened them. The challenge had to be met. If you gave the slightest ground at this time, there was no knowing where the workers would take you. 'The time to break a strike is before it starts,' Sudden had said.

'Unless you take back your strike notice at once I am issuing orders to have all of you dismissed.'

'Now?' they asked in one voice. 'Dismissed!'

'Yes, now! You are the ringleaders. I want an instant withdrawal of the notice and an apology. Do you take back the notice?'

They shuffled awkwardly for a few seconds, looking sorry for themselves and dazed, and it was the man who spoke up for them, 'No, sahib.'

'Very well, then. From this moment, the seven of you are no longer in the employment of the company. By to-morrow morning, I want your quarters vacated.'

'Our houses!' exclaimed Mahipat. 'In this weather!'

'You cannot go on occupying the company's houses when you are no longer in the company's employment.'

'But where can we go, sahib, we and our families?'

'Go and ask Jugal Kishore,' said Henry. 'I want your houses

vacated by first roll call to-morrow—unless you withdraw your strike notice now.'

They shook their heads in dejection. 'We cannot withdraw our notice, sahib. But our demands should at least be discussed, some assurance given . . .'

'I can give no assurance. I want an unconditional withdrawal.'

The deputation filed out of his office in silence, with bowed heads and sullen, brooding faces.

'Devicharan' DEVICHARAN' Henry yelled for the superintendent. 'Put out a notice that these seven have been dismissed with immediate effect. Issue orders for them to vacate their living quarters by to-morrow morning. Ask for police help from Tinapuri to get them out of their houses. Jaldi!' Henry was almost shouting his orders. The deputation of labour leaders was still within ear-shot, and he wanted them to know that he meant business.

For a long time Henry sat staring vacantly at the door through which they had gone, his mind filled with the bitterness of failure. For some reason he had thought he would succeed in forcing them to withdraw their notice, he felt sure that Sudden—if he had been in his place—would have been able to manage it. Now there would have to be a show-down. There had never been a strike before in any of the company's gardens, and it was unbearable that Silent Hill should be the first garden to have one. That was one of the things a man like Sudden Dart would never forgive. Would it make Sudden write him off as a failure? At the thought a cold fear welled up inside him.

But with the leader's refusal to withdraw their notice, the die was cast. On his part Henry would have to make good his threats: dismiss workers of long standing without any compensation, forcibly evict them from their houses, send out their names to the other tea companies to make sure they would never get other jobs in the tea district, and have the leaders rounded up by the police to be systematically beaten to a pulp while in their custody. It made you feel shamefully dehumanized, but that was the way it had to be. The time for feeling sorry for the coolies was gone.

This was a much bigger issue than a show of strength between himself and his workers, it was, in the last analysis, a struggle between management and labour, between Sudden Dart and all that he stood for on the one side, and Jugal Kishore and his

Bolshevism on the other; it was equally a struggle between Englishmen and Indians, between the forces of good and the forces of evil. There was no question on which side he, Henry Winton, would fight.

Eddie Trevor, the brilliant hockey forward, had grabbed the ball and come thundering down with it, dodging all opposition, and penetrated right into the ring, and the scramble near the goal-post was going to be a crucial one for both sides. Eddie Trevor had suddenly become an ally, a cause to uphold and to fight for.

Even before he had arrived, Eddie Trevor had polluted the clean, hill-top air of Silent Hill, thought Henry. He had certainly not wanted him to come, neither had his labourers; it was Sir Jeffrey who wanted him to come, Sir Jeffrey and almost certainly Ruby Miranda.

And Henry's thoughts were suddenly deflected into a new channel. There was no mistaking Sudden's warning. Sudden had told him in so many words that he did not approve of his intimacy with Ruby Miranda; that he must cry a halt or face the prospect of Sudden's displeasure.

That too was something Eddie Trevor seemed to have contaminated; his new-found, delicately balanced relationship with Ruby Miranda. It was almost certain that it was Trevor's father who had spoken to Sudden Dart about his growing infatuation with Ruby. 'The thin line that separates fun from serious involvement': that had been Sudden's way of expressing it. Sudden, who had never objected to any of his planters getting his fun wherever he could find it, could not possibly have known how close Henry had been drawing to crossing the thin line unless someone had told him. That someone could only be John Trevor whose son had always been desperately in love with Ruby and who was 'jay' of any man who spoke to her.

But as things stood Sudden's warning would have been almost superfluous. The thought of a man like Eddie Trevor looking upon him as a rival, as another man competing for Ruby Miranda's favours, had brought on a surge of nausea. That was a revolting position. No one should point a finger at him as the rival of a raw, half-caste youth; a man he had so recently equated with a daily-wage coolie.

The emotional revulsion stirred up within him had curdled his infatuation for Ruby Miranda. The fact that it had created some

sort of equality between himself and Eddie Trevor was something his pride could not forgive. He would never feel the same about Ruby Miranda again.

Walking back to his bungalow that evening, Henry passed the football ground. No one was playing football; but some two or three hundred labourers had gathered in one corner of the field and were sitting tightly packed, all facing a make-shift platform in the centre of the field. They were listening raptly to a speech by Jugal Kishore.

'It is high time we turned our faces away from the conquerors,' Henry heard Jugal Kishore exhorting them. And as though in obedience to his command, not one of the coolies turned to look at Henry as he skirted the field. For all the interest they took, he might have been one of the Silent Hill street-cleaners or lamp-lighters, and not their manager. The insult cut deeper into his mind than any words of direct abuse would have done.

'If only we stand shoulder to shoulder,' Jugal Kishore was saying in a voice charged with passion, 'those who hold us in slavery will have to quit. WE SHALL MAKE THEM QUIT!'

At the same time, Henry could not help feeling relieved that only about a quarter of his labourers had turned up to listen to Jugal Kishore. With this comforting thought, he quickened his pace. He knew that he had to take action before this thing got out of hand; but that moment had not yet come. There was little he could do until the next morning; only then would he know whether the strike was actually going to materialize. In the meantime, he had sent for police help from Tinapur, and he had also sent a full report of the situation to head office. That had been the most difficult part; to send a report to Sudden that his labourers had threatened to strike. Sudden could never be brought to understand how Indian coolies could think in terms of dictating to a British manager. But Henry had steeled himself to the task, knowing that not to have sent a report to Sudden would have been unforgivable.

There was no drawing back now; things were at last coming to a head. This was a crisis if ever there was one, a time of testing. He was aware that the strike might well end his career as a planter; and yet, now that it had come, it was the sort of challenge he almost welcomed. Everything depended on him, the man on the spot. When you came to think of it, it was not unlike the sort of

situations that had confronted some of the earliest Englishmen in the country. They had all risen to their tasks, and the best among them had risen high above them, coolly thinking out their plans and then going ahead and taking all the risks with a proper disdain for caution—Stringer Lawrence, Gordon, Popham, Lake, Campbell, and those others had met their individual challenges head-on, and between them they had built up the world's greatest Empire. It almost needed a crisis to bring out the best in a man.

Striding up the red laterite road leading to his bungalow in the crisply cold January evening, Henry experienced a new sense of exhilaration, even a faint kinship with the figures of history; this is what a soldier must feel on the eve of a battle, he said to himself.

It was by the sheerest chance that he happened to look in the direction of the schoolhouse, a little higher up on the slope of the hill on his left, and noticed the red painted motor-cycle standing near the wicket gate of Ruby Miranda's cottage, glinting impudently in the last rays of the sun.

So Eddie Trevor had arrived.

18

'Chale jao; Chale jao!'

HENRY slept soundly that night. When he woke, the glow of elation, of being equal to the situation, was still with him. At last he was coming to grips with what had so far been only a haunting shadow—a show-down with labour; and he, Henry Winton, product of an English public school and trained under a man like Sir Jeffrey Dart, was facing the challenge. He did not have the least doubt that his side would win.

The pity of it was that it had so little to do with labour itself. Labour was merely the ammunition, highly expendable. Both sides in the battle stood well back; it was the labourers who took all the punishment—illiterate, order-obeying, easily-swayed creatures with the simple minds of children. The other side hit at you through the labourers, and you hit back twice as hard, not at them, but at the labourers. Your success depended on how hard you hit at the labourers.

Henry knew his coolies as a schoolmaster knows his pupils and he knew most of them by name. He knew their failings and their good qualities. He knew exactly what sort of argument would appeal to them; he knew how easily they could be swayed by the rhetoric of such a man as Jugal Kishore; and he knew the precise antidote to that rhetoric. For a moment, for a brief moment only, he felt distressed by the thought of the punishment his labourers were going to have to take in the coming battle, but he quickly shook away the thought. This was war, and in war you could not afford to feel sorry for those who were ranged against you.

By seven o'clock, Henry was on his rounds, savouring the heady glow of a new purpose. All the bottled up rage of the past few weeks had found an outlet. The one-tusker, Jugal Kishore, Eddie Trevor, even Jean Walters and Ruby Miranda were merely figures in the background; his anger had found a higher, more worthy target. The strike was something he could get his teeth into; the

challenge of the brown, menacing world of labour, the challenge of India itself.

Henry was almost glad when he read the poster which was stuck to his gatepost:

GET RID OF TREVOR

WINTON!

OR GO HOME !

Similar posters, both in English and Hindi, had been put up on most of the buildings and on prominent landmarks. In his present frame of mind, it was an oddly satisfying experience to be singled out for so much collective denouncement.

Between two and three hundred coolies had struck work; there was no way of telling exactly how many till he had all the roll-calls in his hands. Many of the strikers were standing in the courtyard outside the main office buildings. In the centre, standing hand in hand with a boy of about seventeen, was an old enemy: Gauri. As Henry came close to the office gate, one of them stepped forward and shouted, 'Are we going to stand for Trevor?'

'Never, never!' came from the others a little uncertainly. Some of the coolies were laughing as they shouted 'Never, never!' and Henry realized that this was because they had no idea what the words meant. He stood in their midst and turned to look at their faces, making a mental note of their names. There they stood, the brown, earthy men and women, already looking dazed and bewildered, but keeping up a pretence of careless defiance under his stare. They were his enemies now. It was difficult to think of some of them as his enemies.

It was only when he turned his back that they began shouting once again, 'Are we going to stand for Trevor?'

'Never, never!'

'Never, never! Never, never! NEVER, NEVER!' their shouts followed him as he turned from the gate, and he could distinctly hear Gauri's piercing voice leading them, 'Never, never! NEVER, NEVER!'

Henry continued his daily rounds as though nothing had happened, as though nothing was happening; and to underline his complete lack of fear, he did not carry even his usual Malacca walking-stick with him.

A check round the garden showed him that two hundred and seventy-eight coolies had not turned up for work. That would mean

that nearly two-hundred and sixty were on strike; the remaining eighteen could be accounted for by those who might be sick. He was relieved that the number of strikers was relatively small—if only for the reason that it would make his job less distasteful.

In the storage sheds he ran into Eddie Trevor, surrounded by piles of baskets and coils of rope and pick-axes and shovels and empty boxes, looking cheerful and quite at home. He was wearing a khaki suit and thick, rubber-soled boots, and he appeared already to have taken full charge of his duties, for he was busy with the registers, and Patiram, his assistant, was leaning over his shoulder, explaining the entries to him.

'How many of your men have reported for work?' Henry asked Patiram, speaking in Hindi.

'Nine have come, sir,' Trevor told him. 'Only one absent, Jugal Kishore's nephew.'

'Oh,' said Henry, 'I see you're trying to learn the job.'

'Yes, sir,' said Trevor, 'right from scratch.'

'Let me know if anything out of the way happens, will you?' said Henry to Patiram, again speaking in Hindi.

'Yes, sir,' answered Trevor. Then he added, 'What a lot of trouble I seem to have caused.'

'I expect it will sort itself out,' answered Henry.

'Begging your pardon, sir,' said Trevor, 'would you like me to come to the office to . . . er, help out with . . .'

'No!' said Henry with a withering look. He had not felt the slightest resentment while talking to Trevor who had been the cause of it all; only a slight irritation at the somewhat over-zealous assumption of responsibility, the suggestion of cockiness. But there was no bitterness in him; somehow he already felt quite detached from yesterday and all the days before, wrenched away from his own weaknesses, completely free and light, as though stripped for action. A man, at last, he told himself. A man.

Hungry for breakfast, he went up to his bungalow and sat down to eggs and bacon and buttered toast, and read the *Statesman*. When he removed the lid from the jam-jar, he noticed that it was filled with some fresh jam.

'What jam is this?' Henry asked the head boy.

'Guava jam, sahib. School miss-sahib sent.'

'Oh,' said Henry, putting the lid back.

He sat at the table for a long time, smoking his pipe and thinking out his moves coolly, weighing the risks, deciding on his plan of action. It was wonderful to be in the midst of things happening, where all the responsibility rested squarely on your own shoulders; you were the man on the spot. It was only by the men on the spot, acting on their own initiative in emergencies such as this one, that the Empire had been built up. Henry felt supremely confident, equal to the tasks that faced him.

He picked up the jam-jar, walked to the window and hurled it deep into the valley. The action somehow sealed his new mood of independence.

As he walked back to the office after breakfast, he saw the two police vans standing in the drive, and a turbaned police inspector was waiting for him in the verandah. When he reached the main gate, the strikers standing in the courtyard again took up their chant:

Chale jao; Chale jao !
Winton sahib chale jao !
Are we going to stand for Trevor ?
Never, never !

The police inspector saluted him as he climbed the steps, and Henry told him to come into his office to discuss their plans. He was a fat, round-faced Bengali with a drooping, Kai-lung moustache and bulging, opaque eyes.

'How many men have you brought with you?' asked Henry.

'Twenty-four, sir,' answered the inspector.

'Good! Do you think you'll be able to tackle this thing?'

The inspector nodded his head confidently. 'Yes, sir.'

'How?'

'We bheel habh to separate the leaders farst; round up the leaders and break up the crowd beeth a lathi-charge. . . .'

'You mean beat them up?'

The inspector nodded with assurance. 'The lathis are stadded, sir.'

'And what will you do with the leaders?'

'We take them to the thana and we beat them up there; we habh better faceelities at the thana.' Like most Indians, the inspector was inclined to lengthen all his vowels and to pronounce his 'v's' with a 'bh' sound.

There was a cold, empty feeling in Henry's stomach. He had heard of some of the special refinements of torture indulged in by the police in India; it was said that given three days to work on their man, they could extort a confession of murder from anyone they chose. 'I suppose it is necessary to make some sort of an example,' Henry said. 'But can't we manage with a little less violence? I should like to talk to them, first, instead of lathi-charging.'

'Baat, talking no good, sir,' the inspector protested. 'Not beeth coolies. They habh to see blaad.'

No, there was going to be no blood, if he could help it. He certainly had no mind to let the inspector have a free hand with his coolies.

'Look, you round up the ringleaders and take them away and do what you like with them. But I want to talk to the others and see if they will disperse quietly. Let's have no bloodshed here if we can help it.'

'As your honour orders,' said the policeman. Then he asked, 'Baat do you know the leaders, sir?'

'Oh, yes, I will help you to round up the leaders. I suppose they deserve what is coming to them.'

'Yes, sir,' the inspector said, nodding his head slowly in approval. 'We habh our ways. They weel nebber go on strike again.'

Henry felt a cold finger being drawn along his spine as he watched the policeman's eyes, lifeless and permanently half-closed, like the eyes of a dead man. His greasy, flat-nosed face reminded Henry of the face of some primitive carving; an image representing evil and uncleanness. Henry looked quickly away. 'This is what I propose to do,' he said. 'At first we will . . . Oh, my God! What's the meaning of that?' he exclaimed.

Outside, the mob at the gate had begun to shout once again:

Jus tice!
Mister Trevor!
Never, never!
We want!
Jus tice!

Henry went to the window which overlooked the gate and the courtyard just in time to see Sir Jeffrey's long grey Daimler turning through the gate.

'Damn!' exclaimed Henry. 'Oh, damn, damn, damn!' and went rushing out to receive his Resident Director.

Sudden came hurrying in, wearing a thick brown Harris tweed suit and a green pork-pie hat; round his middle he wore a canvas belt from which hung an extra-large revolver.

'Arkell won't be able to get here until to-morrow,' he announced breathlessly as soon as they were inside Henry's office. 'In the meantime, we've just got to handle this thing ourselves.'

Henry felt resentful of the 'we'. It was his tamasha, not Sudden's, and he had no wish to let Sudden muck it up. He said, 'We were at it, as you see, sir. I was just going into a huddle with the inspector here. Would you care to go to the bungalow for breakfast?'

Sudden glowered at him. 'Breakfast, Henry! No, this is no time to be thinking of one's comforts. Let's forget breakfast and get cracking down on this strike.'

'Very well, sir,' said Henry, sitting down in his seat at the head of the table. It was the first time he had sat down while Sudden happened to be still standing; it was also the first time he had taken the seat at the head of the table as though by right.

Sudden took a long time to sit down. He took out his pipe and lit it, still standing, still breathing heavily. Henry waited for him to sit down, drumming his fingers on the table impatiently.

'Now let's get at this from the very beginning,' Sudden began, as though determined to take control of the proceedings. 'What are their demands?'

'I have already explained it all, sir, in my telegram,' Henry said with a patient air. 'They want Patiram as their stockman; they don't want Trevor.'

'Humm, nothing else?'

'No, nothing; at least, not on the surface. But there's a good deal more at the back of all this, of course: the entire labour movement. Wallach, as you must remember, was slightly Bolshy himself. He tended to encourage his labour to get itself organized; and by the time I took over, the thing had taken root. The chief man behind all this is Jugal Kishore, a man crooked as they come. He has resigned and gone, and he's not about to-day; but he's at the back of all this. That girl standing in the centre is his niece -- or so he says. Knows English. It's she who must have rehearsed them in their chant. Jugal Kishore himself is now a candidate for an Assembly by-election. Many of the labourers regard him as their spokesman; but not all, thank God! This strike is part of an election stunt too, of course, because if Jugal Kishore's name figures prominently in a

strike—in a strike against a British company—his election will be almost a certainty.’

‘So there’s . . . hummm; there’s no question of a settlement, what?’ asked Sir Jeffrey.

‘None whatever. That would be disastrous.’

‘Hummm,’ said Sudden again, and puffed at his pipe ‘In the meantime, what steps have you taken so far, Henry?’

‘I have dismissed the ringleaders and warned them that they must vacate their quarters instantly. I am going to send out a police party in the afternoon to evict them—throw their belongings on the road if necessary.’

‘Good!’ said Sir Jeffrey, nodding his approval. ‘What else? What do you propose to do now? Don’t forget six thousand pounds of leaf is likely to go to waste every day.’

‘I was just going to go into our course of action with the inspector here,’ said Henry, ‘when our discussion was over, when you came in.’

Sudden seemed to take that in his stride. He went on as though he had not noticed what Henry had said. ‘Well, I approve of the line you have taken so far, Henry. We can’t afford to be half-hearted about these things. At the same time, I don’t want any flare up, you know how the Indians will pounce upon anything like that. . . .’

‘Please don’t worry about a flare up, Sir Jeffrey. I hear there’s no flare up now,’ Henry assured him ‘and there won’t be one later. Just leave things to me.’

‘Very well. I don’t want to interfere with your conduct of this . . . er, unless things seem to get out of hand. A good general doesn’t go mucking about with his staff’s plans unless they’re making a balls of it. But can I have a word with you in private, Henry?’

‘Habb I your parmission to leabhe sir?’ said the inspector promptly, rising from his chair.

‘No, no,’ replied Henry impatiently. ‘Sir Jeffrey and I will rejoin you in a minute.’

They went to the far corner of the office, and Sudden placed a hand on Henry’s shoulder. ‘There’s no question of buying this chap Jugal Kishore off, is there, Henry?’ he whispered. ‘A few hundred rupees?’

‘Buying him off?’ You’ve already bought him off once at least,

Arkell has, and this is the result. If you wish to try anything of that kind, Sir Jeffrey, I would ask to be absolved of all responsibility. . . .'

'No, no, Henry. You handle this, old boy, absolutely your own way. I just thought . . . I had brought the cash with me. You are quite certain?'

'Anything like that is quite out of the question,' Henry told him very firmly.

'All right, all right,' said Sir Jeffrey loudly, once again including the inspector in their conversation. 'I leave it in your hands, Henry. I have the fullest confidence in you.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Henry, grateful for the unaccustomed expression of confidence.

'I shall sit here, by the window, Henry,' said Sudden, literally taking a back seat, 'and watch the proceedings.'

We want !
Jus tice !
Mister Trevor !
Never, never !
Winton sahib !
Chale jao !

'Chale-jao, chale-jao, chale-jao, chale-jao!' The strikers were joining in an increasing numbers, eagerly pouncing upon the only phrase with which they were familiar. 'Chale-jao, chale-jao, chale-jao, CHALE-JAO, CHALE-JAO !'

'STOP!' shouted Henry Winton at them from the steps of the office building. 'Thero! Ek dum!'

There was an abrupt silence as the labourers stopped their chant of chale-jao. They all turned their heads to face the office steps. Henry Winton stood on the highest step while the policemen stood on the lower steps.

'Let those who call themselves your leaders come forward, here!' said Henry.

The only two who stepped forward were Gauri and her brother.

There was a good deal of mumbling amongst the others, each one seeming to look to the other to take the lead, but there was no one eager to come forward as a leader.

Henry looked coldly at the two leaders, without a spark of recog-

nition in his eyes. 'Just a boy and a girl? No others who call themselves leaders? All right; if you don't know who your own leaders are,' said Henry, 'I will tell you. Step out and stand here as I call out your names!'

Henry opened his black-list file and began to read out the names, and the leaders began to step forward one by one. Henry read out twenty names although his list contained at least twice as many more. Mahipat and the others who had come to him the previous afternoon stood in the centre, behind Gauri and her brother.

Henry turned to the inspector, and once again those cold, half-closed, lifeless, policeman's eyes set up a wave of revulsion within him. But this was no time for squeamishness.

'Now!' he said to the inspector.

The inspector barked an order in Hindustani and ten policemen ran out and stood in the gateway, neatly separating the leaders from the others. Ten other policemen, brandishing their studded lathis, placed themselves in a ring round the group of leaders. The remaining four policemen and the inspector stood close to Henry.

'These twenty men and women are under arrest,' announced Henry. 'They are also being dismissed. Their houses will be taken back by the company; their belongings will be thrown into the road before this evening is over. These men and women will now be sent off in the police vans to await their trial.'

Pushing with their lathis, the policemen herded the arrested coolies near the two vans. There was a mounting buzz of conversation, and when the doors of the van were opened, there arose a wail amongst the workers who were standing beyond the gate.

'Stop!' shouted Henry. 'Listen!'

They stopped, they listened.

'These men and women have ruined themselves for life. Lost their jobs, lost their houses; and nobody is going to give them other jobs. Their wives and children and their dependents will have to beg, and they will have no roof over their heads. Do you want this to happen to you? Do you?'

'No, sahib,' a meek voice said.

'But we want justice,' said another, more loudly.

'Who was that?' Henry demanded. 'Step forward, whoever said that.'

No one came forward. All of them stood with their heads hanging down.

'There will be no justice so long as the white men rule!' shouted Gauri defiantly.

'Never, never!' yelled her brother.

But this time, none of the others took up the chant.

This was the moment Henry Winton had been dreading, although he knew it was bound to come. It was a choice between what he intended to do, or a lathi-charge by the inspector and his men. He squared his shoulders and strode up to the coolies rounded up near the vans. He stood in front of the boy, looking down at his trembling, defiant face for a long time, and then brought the back of his hand crashing against his mouth, again and again until the boy bent forward and crumpled and fell against his sister who put out her arms and caught him and hugged him close to her, limp and bleeding.

Gauri turned on Henry, white-faced and venomous, her eyes glinting with a burning, all-consuming rage, reminding Henry of a hooded cobra about to strike or an outraged temple goddess. 'I shall kill you for this, you white monster!' she hissed. 'I shall kill you.'

No one could have heard those words. They were like a secret message, whispered to him in confidence, and for a moment Henry felt stunned by their virulence. Then he got a grip on himself, and almost as a reflex action, his fist shot out and hit the bold, upturned face, feeling the impact of the cold, soft, lips and cheek against his knuckles.

There was a gasp from the crowd, and then a pindrop silence as Henry walked back to the office steps, punctuated only by the sound of his measured footsteps crunching heavily on the gravel. He stood facing them once again.

'You want justice,' said Henry. 'There is always justice here; there is always justice under a British company. But at the same time, there is limitless power too, and no one can oppose a British company. No one! All the police in this country, all the great army, are at the back of a British company. To-morrow morning, the big police chief will be here. After that, any time there is a collection of people, or any kind of demonstration, there will be firing. You will be shot down, understand? Not just arrested and sent away. Do you want that to happen to you?'

This time, no one made a reply.

'Think of your wives and children, your husbands, think of your

warm, pucca, company-built houses; think of the future. Those who tell you to go on strike do not live here, they have already run away. They sit in their houses, safe. They don't come here to die as you will die when the police start firing. We shall not hesitate to shoot, and we shall shoot to kill. Are you ready to die?'

They still had nothing to say.

'As I told you, there is always justice under a British company. But justice demands that all of you who are here should be dismissed and driven out. Two hundred more jobs for the hungry, two hundred more homes for the homeless. I have twenty men waiting for every one of your jobs. Do you want to give up your jobs? I am ready, the police are ready, the men to take your jobs and your houses are waiting.'

'No, sahib,' said one or two voices.

'But we have something more than justice in this company,' continued Henry. 'We have kindness also. By rights, all of you, all those who have not gone on work to-day, should be dismissed. But all of you are fortunate to-day because the burra-sahib has come here. The burra sahib has given me orders that this afternoon, at two o'clock, the roll-call shall be taken again, in all your working areas. And those of you who are marked present will be treated as though you had never struck work. But two hours is all you have. You can do what you like, but my advice to you, as your well wisher, is to go back to your work and thank your gods that the burra-sahib is with you to day.'

Henry turned on his heel at the same time as the police vans began to move out of the courtyard. The labourers watched them as though in a daze, and as the vans turned the corner, once again there arose a wail from their midst.

'Are you ready for lunch now, sir?' asked Henry.

'I think you handled that tricky situation very well,' said Sudden, still looking tense and white from the excitement. 'Very well in deed. Do you think they will turn up for work?'

'Absolutely. Jugal Kishore can appeal to their emotions, we can hit at their bellies. It is hardly a fair fight.'

'Good! To tell you the truth I am feeling quite peckish. I hadn't realized you could speak the lingo all that well, Henry,' remarked Sir Jeffrey as they drove back to lunch.

The crowd at the gates had already disappeared.

'It was jolly decent of you to give me the credit, Henry,' Sudden said looking back at the empty courtyard. 'Thank you.'

As soon as he had attained the privacy of his bathroom, Henry put his head over the wash basin and was violently sick. He sat down on the cold white floor for a long time, trying to stop the uncontrollable shivering of his shoulders. He felt limp and played out, convinced that he could not keep up appearances much longer. His whole being ached to get away from it all, before he was irretrievably sucked in, before he learnt to accept physical violence to passive, unresisting men and women as a part of life, like the dead-eyed Bengali police inspector; or before he broke down altogether. He wanted no more of Assam politics; no more of being a pawn in the murky passions of Anglo-India; no more of Sudden Dart and Chinnar; no more of British self-righteousness; and all the while, a beautiful young face crazed with hatred kept mocking at him in defiance, 'You white monster'

Henry stripped and took a cold shower, and before he joined Sudden helped himself to a half-glass of neat brandy.

19

The Room with a View

'THIS is a wonderful room,' said Sudden appreciatively.

'I've just had it done up,' Henry told him.

'Where did you get the curtains?'

'Bought them in Calcutta. Handloom stuff.'

'Damn good; oh, damn good! I wish some of the other managers were as particular about keeping up the company's houses.'

'I am very glad you like it, sir.'

'Like it? It's wonderful! I must remember to tell Kitty about it. Possibly bring her here, for the next inspection. What do you think?'

'It would be a very good idea, sir.'

They had finished dinner, and Henry had come into the spare-room to ask Sudden if he wanted anything.

It was a wonderful room, as Sudden had said, this room at the end of the bungalow with its breath-taking view of the immense Koyna valley; the spare-room, cosy and private and made to order for romance; the spare-room with its corner fire-place and its cheerful handloom curtains and its pale-green Kalimpong rug, its narrow bachelor bed with the sponge-rubber mattress specially installed for Ruby Miranda's visits.

Sudden was sitting on the bed, smoking a cigar. He was already in his pyjamas, and he wore a gorgeous yellow dressing-gown made of Hyderabad brocade. He looked more like a Roman Emperor than ever, Nero in an expansive mood, thought Henry.

'Wonderful mattress, this. I never knew these rubber mattresses could be so comfortable.'

'Oh, yes, they're very comfortable,' said Henry. 'Is there anything else you would like?'

'What I should like is a night-cap; just whisky-and-water. Why don't you join me?'

The boy brought the bottle of the specially stocked Black Dog whisky and a jug of water and some glasses on a tray, and Henry poured out the drinks.

'Draw up a chair,' invited Sudden. With the ending of the crisis their relationship seemed to have automatically slipped back into the old groove. Sudden had once again assumed command.

'Try a cigar,' said Sudden, holding out his pigskin case.

'Thank you, sir,' said Henry, taking one of Sudden's Coronas.

'They're rather special. The Army and Navy Stores import them for me.'

'They certainly look special; and they smell awfully good.'

'That dog of yours: is he any good as a bird dog?—or just putting up women?' asked Sudden, but there was a glint in his eyes and a suggestion of a smile on his face.

'He's a first-class retriever; absolutely first-class.'

'Handome beast. I suppose he's one of the Banchory lot.'

'That's right, sir.'

'I must congratulate you, Henry, on the way you handled those men to-day,' said Sudden, with the air of a man coming to the main item on the agenda.

'It was easy, sir; dead easy. I know those coolies, dammit. I should know them. I know each one of them, almost, by name.'

'I didn't know how it was all going to end up. No one likes . . . likes a bloody flare-up, you know, of any kind. . . .'

'I had assured you there was going to be no flare-up, Sir Jeffrey,' said Henry.

'Ah, but you were the only one who seemed to be so sure. I wasn't I'm sure the inspector wasn't. And Arkell had warned me to expect all hell to break loose if we didn't give his men the fullest freedom of action. . . .'

'You saw how meekly they went away, sir.'

'Indeed I did. Do you think they'll behave from now on?'

'Yes: now that their leaders have been nabbed. The coolies, left to themselves, are no trouble at all.'

'Frankly, I had never expected anyone could get away with so much, er . . . firmness,' said Sudden, wagging his head. 'The police, yes; but not one of the managers.'

It was Sudden himself who had always insisted upon firmness. Was he being sarcastic? Henry wondered.

'But you yourself have said, often enough, Sir Jeffrey, that that's the only way to deal with coolies. They're like animals. Once they begin their headlong stampede no one can stop them: before the stampede begins, you can whip them back.'

'But one can never tell with a mob, Henry. I really thought you were taking far too much upon yourself . . . sticking out your neck, rather.'

'I just had to. Did you know the inspector's idea was a lathi-charge against the strikers—break some heads?'

'I expect the police here just have to depend upon a certain amount of violence. It was wonderful, of course, the way it went off; but if it had gone wrong . . . Well, the people at home would have raised God's own trouble. One has to be extremely careful in the present political climate; with all these Gandhis and Nehrus preaching sedition all over the bloody country.'

'Would you care for another of these?' asked Henry.

'Only if you're having one,' said Sudden, holding out his glass. Henry poured out two more drinks.

'Chin chin,' said Sudden.

'Chin chin, sir.'

'I say, I've been meaning to ask you. Do you think it would be . . . er, advisable, in view of what has happened, if I were to transfer this chap Trevor to one of the other gardens; say, a month or two from now?'

'No, sir! Oh, no! That would at once be taken as an admission of . . . Well, it wouldn't do at all to move Trevor.'

'You personally have no objection to the chap?'

'None at all.'

'Oh! Somehow I rather got the impression that you hated his guts.'

'No, sir. He seems perfectly all right, and very eager to learn, from what little I have seen of him.'

'I'm glad. But I don't want to keep him here if there's going to be any repetition of this kind of thing; just on account of him.'

'There's no possibility of that now.'

'I'm very glad, Henry. As it was, I was feeling, at least, er . . . partially responsible for this trouble. After all, it was I who insisted that you should take on this chap. . . .'

'You must have had your own reasons, sir.'

'What's that?' asked Sudden, leaning forward.

'Well, sometimes one doesn't quite know the full reason for any higher-level decision; and then one tries to oppose that decision. Only till it is finalized, of course. Once the decision is final, it is equally the decision of the subordinate as well as of his chief. From

then on it's everyone's business to see that it is carried through.'

'That's true enough. Still, I don't like being somehow connected with this sort of trouble, you know. . . .'

'There can be no question of that. The responsibility, initially, is Wallach's, for encouraging this sort of nonsense. More directly, it's Jugal Kishore's.'

'If you ask me, it is just a sign of the times,' pronounced Sudden. 'Just a sign of the times; what with the damage done at home by the labour movement. . . .'

Sudden must have got back to normal at last, thought Henry, now that he had begun to talk like an oracle. It was time to finish his drink and say good night.

But it was clear that Sudden himself hadn't finished. He was still being expansive, gracious, generous with praise.

'Is there anything special you'd like to ask, Henry?' said Sudden a few minutes later. 'I mean, now that I'm here, is there anything you have in mind wanting to put up to me officially?'

'As a matter of fact, there is, Sir Jeffrey.'

'And what is it, Henry?'

'When I was in Chinnar for the Week, you asked me if I would like to go home on leave this year, although I'm not due to go until 1940. You said that six months in England would do me a lot of good.'

'Oh, did I? I couldn't have meant it terribly seriously, you know; there was no question at any time of casting aspersions on your efficiency. It is just one of those things. At that time, I had not seen you breaking up a serious labour agitation single-handed, what?'

'Hardly single-handed, sir. You were there too, which helped, and of course the police. But as I was saying; you asked me then if I wanted to go on leave now instead of in 1940. Well I do.'

'What?'

'Want to go on leave; if it is at all possible.'

'When?'

'Right away, sir, the sooner the better.'

Sudden looked at Henry with narrowed eyes. Then he said, 'Give me another drink, Henry.'

He sipped the drink for a while in silence, looking intently into the fire. Then he said, 'I suppose it is a small thing to ask, really. All right. I shall be sending you the orders as soon as I get back to

Chinnar; well, as soon as I can find someone to relieve you. But on your part, when the situation here is perfectly normal, you can consider yourself to be on home leave.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Henry. 'Thank you very much.'

PART II

RETURN FROM LEAVE

Good-bye Miss Chips

THE Silent Hill tea estate was bathed in the autumn sunlight, clean and rain-washed: the tea bushes, bright-green and disciplined, provided the perfect background for the colourful crawling lines of women plucking; the tin-roofed factory building was freshly painted and humming with activity. Even from the bungalow, you could see the way things were going; there was an air of prosperity, of vigorous growth, even of serene contentment.

'It was Cockburn sahib's hand,' the coolies had been saying to each other, for it was Cockburn who had been managing the estate during Henry's absence on leave; Cockburn who was due to retire in March and who had agreed to stay on and look after the Silent Hill estate so that Henry Winton could take home leave a whole year before he was due for it. Everything had fallen under a smooth, easy routine under Cockburn's guardianship; slipshod, easy-going, hard-drinking Cockburn; he must have tea running in his veins instead of blood, Henry reflected – rich, hot, sweet tea laced with rum.

And now, with the war on, it looked as though Cockburn's retirement would have to be postponed indefinitely. No new college boys could be expected to come out from England to work in the tea-gardens until the war was over. Instead of being sent into retirement as soon as Henry came back from leave, Cockburn had been asked by Sudden to remain in India as manager at Lamlung. It had taken a world war to give Cockburn the chance of achieving his modest heart's desire to go on being manager at Lamlung until he died. At least, the way things were going, it looked very much as though he would.

From the verandah of the bungalow, Henry Winton surveyed his sparkling domain snuggled against the stark immensity of the Himalayas. He flared his nostrils and sniffed the pine-scented air, bracing his body on his strong, footballer's legs as though on a ship's swaying deck, feeling the mellow breeze against his face. He was

looking down at the garden, once again his garden, and he was enjoying the process immensely. It was like coming home.

Cockburn had gone away, leaving him a cleaned-up, sweet smelling, happy tea-garden. He must take things up from there and clean up some of the clutter of his own personal life before Jean arrived. Owing to the onset of the war, her booking had had to be cancelled at the last minute, and she had been unable to come out with him. In a way, Henry had been thankful that the war and the consequent disruption of shipping schedules had provided him with a ready-made excuse to get to Silent Hill ahead of his bride and prepare the ground for her coming—to get his private life running in tune with the smoothly running garden.

It was Saturday, 30 September, and Henry had just finished breakfast. The number-one boy came out and announced, 'The school Miss-sahib is here, sir.'

The number-one houseboy was a new servant he had taken on, a trained Goanese boy who spoke English. Henry had not become used to a servant addressing him as 'sir' instead of 'sahib'.

'Show her into the gun-room,' ordered Henry without turning his head. He filled his pipe, taking his time deliberately, taking his time so that he could once again run over what he was going to say to Ruby Miranda if she should choose to make a scene.

The cold formality of her reception did not altogether surprise Ruby Miranda, but it made her cheeks burn with anger. She followed the boy into the gun-room. The boy drew up a chair for her in front of Henry's desk, salaamed, and went out, not cheeky or anything, but not polite and friendly like the old head boy either.

As Ruby Miranda stood by her chair, looking through the bars of the window into the valley below and following the red ribbon of the road going down to Tinapur, her mother's warning came back to her: 'Don't go running after Englishmen; they don't marry our folk,' Ma had warned her, 'Not the pucca ones.'

It was her father who had felt more sure for her—bumbling, easy-going, rum-soaked, friend-of-the-world loco-shed-sahib. He had always wanted everything of the best for his Roob-girl.

'No, fear,' he had said to the others. 'It's chum who'll get the Englishman to marry her in the end. You can trust my Roob-girl to catch the Englishman!'

She had tried, his Roob-girl had tried terribly hard to catch the

Englishman; she had even gone on her knees before ash-covered sadhus sitting naked under peepul trees. She had failed.

'The bloody Englishman will drop you in the muck!' Eddie Trevor had warned her.

Henry Winton, the Englishman, had done just that. He had gone off to his country on eight months' leave and married an English girl. He had gone off on leave quite unexpectedly, without telling anyone of his plans. Now he was back, a married man. The wife was expected by the next P and O boat, though of course no one could say when the next P and O boat would be arriving: she might take a week, she might take six months, she might be sunk by German submarines - Ruby almost hoped she would be sunk by a submarine.

So he was trying to get all his affairs shipshape before his wife arrived, just as he was getting his bungalow all spruced up to welcome her. Ruby looked inquiringly round the room. The brown, flowered Mirzapur carpet on the floor and the Peter Scott print on the wall had always been there. Then she happened to see the brand new chiming clock on the mantelpiece and, beside it, a large, silver-framed photograph.

So that was she: that was Jean Walters who had become Mrs. Henry Winton. Ruby examined the photograph carefully. The face was a little too thin, perhaps, the nose a little too long to be really beautiful, but you could not escape the Englishness of her face. She had never thought he could manage to get hold of anyone quite so good-looking.

That was the woman for whom he was rearranging his whole life, and his getting rid of Ruby Miranda, was all a part of it, just like getting an English-speaking houseboy, and new furniture and curtains for the bungalow. At the same time, he was being considerate, doing his best to find a job for her, and Ruby Miranda was grateful for all that he was doing. Going back to Tinapur to her old life after all that had happened, to the squalor and poverty and shoddiness, to the jibes of the blowsy, faded railway-colony matrons in their faded Mother-Hubbards, to the snuggers of the railway-colony girls who had always been jealous of her, would have been unthinkable.

Ruby Miranda had never felt so mixed-up in her life. She hated Henry with an all-consuming bitterness, as the man who had squandered her love, and she hated herself just as bitterly for her own

complete dependence on him; having to look to him to provide her with a job and save her from the humiliation of returning to Tinapui.

At the moment, there was the mortification of being made to wait in the gun-room. Nine months earlier, she was just getting used to the idea of coming into the bungalow whenever she liked. The old head boy and the other servants had already begun to treat her as the memsahib, and Herman, the dog, used to give her a wildly affectionate greeting every time it saw her. She had even occupied the spare-bedroom in the house, just once, before the Christmas holidays. At that time, Henry had given her no indication that he would be going on leave within a couple of weeks. If anything, she had got the impression that the room had been fitted out specially for her, that she could go on using it whenever she liked, go on using it until, she had hoped, the time came for her to move into the main bedroom. That time too had seemed close at hand but something had happened. Something within him must have snapped during that strike. He had gone to England soon afterwards, without any warning and now, on his return, she was being made to wait in the gun room just as though she were some erring supervisor who had been sent for by the manager sahib.

She watched Henry come in, wearing khaki shorts and thick woollen stockings and heavy soled boots, blue shirt and old school scarf and a loose fitting brown tweed jacket, a heavy-shouldered, medium tall man with pale blue eyes and pale, already thinning, straw-coloured hair. He came in, mumbled 'Good morning', and sat down behind his desk puffing at his cherry coloured pipe with excessive concentration.

'The swine! the little tin god snob! the white swine!' Ruby kept saying to herself. If he thinks I am going to cry or make a scene or anything like that, he is totally mistaken the bloody white swine!

Henry looked at her appreciatively, even with a touch of his old longing for her. He glanced at the portrait on the mantelpiece, comparing the lush, dark, tropical loveliness of his mistress positively shrieking with sex appeal with the fair, virginal, English-rose type of beauty of his bride.

'I have managed to wangle the job for you, he told her brightly.

Ruby looked at the square face, the pale, receding hair, the long,

thin nose, the clumsy roundness of the shoulders, and for the first time she wondered how any girl as good-looking as herself could have fallen in love with anyone as conspicuously plain as Henry Winton, and quickly shrank away from the answer that sprang to her mind: it was the fact that he was an Englishman, a passport to the dream world of Eurasian womanhood; this man who had been her lover and was now throwing her aside without explanation or apology merely because he had found for himself an all-white girl from his own country; expecting her to be grateful for finding her a job; to grovel before him for the crumbs falling from English tables. She gripped the arm of her chair hard, noticing that her knuckles were showing white and bloodless against the dark wood.

'The committee, as usual, had no views,' said Henry. 'They wanted a cue from the chairman. I had primed him before, of course, and his only objection seemed to be that you were far too good-looking to be in charge of a club-house where most of the members are bachelors.'

'What made him change his mind?' asked Ruby.

Henry looked at her in surprise. Nine months ago, she would have pronounced the same words. 'Wuth maide im chainge is muind?' Now there was little anyone could find fault with in her speech. She didn't speak like an English girl, of course—she never would; but she spoke the language as any well-educated foreigner would speak it.

'Oh, his wife,' said Henry breezily. 'Shot the old boy down, for once. Lady Dart came out and said that a good-looking housekeeper would improve the attendance. Outspoken old dame! You can join right away. To-day, if you like.'

'Thanks,' said Ruby. 'Thanks for everything.' He noticed that she was fully at home with the repetitive 'th' sound. It was astonishing how well she had overcome the almost insurmountable linguistic handicaps of her race.

'Damn good job,' remarked Henry, 'two hundred a month. Twice as much as your present pay and all found.'

Ruby Miranda was perfectly aware that they were taking her on at the Club only because they could not get another woman out from England on account of the war; but she did not say anything about that.

'How much did they use to pay Mrs. Maitland?' she asked.

'About five hundred rupees. But, remember, she was a planter's

widow. Her husband died in . . . in the company's service.

'Also, she was an Englishwoman,' Ruby could not help pointing out.

'There is that, of course. You will be the first . . . er, Anglo Indian housekeeper.'

'Thank you,' said Ruby again, as she rose from the chair.

Henry leaned back in his swivel-chair and looked at Ruby Muanda. She had filled out a little during his absence, but the roundness went well with her type of beauty. His lifted his eyes to her face and for the first time became aware of the emotional storm raging within her: the pallor of the honey-coloured cheeks with the patches of rouge standing out angrily on the slightly prominent cheekbones, the trembling of the full, ripe lips, the unnatural brightness of the eyes brimming with tears. He thought she had never looked lovelier, and for a moment he was overwhelmed by his old longing for her.

'Wait,' said Henry. He got up and walked to the ammunition cupboard in the corner. He unlocked the cupboard and took out the large, sparkling, gift-bottle of Chanel No. 5 which he had bought for his wife from the duty free shop on the ship. Silently, Henry held out the bottle to Ruby, observing her face to see her reactions, and when she shrank away from him, he placed the bottle temptingly close to her on the table. Then he went up to her and pulled her into his arms, roughly and with assurance and, bending her head back, kissed her heavily on the mouth.

'No, no!' Ruby spat out, pushing herself away with all her strength, and suddenly losing all control of herself. 'No, you brute! You white swine! I hate you! I hate you! I don't have to take anything from you any more— that or anything else. You go and do that to that all white English bitch you have married— not to me!'

And reaching for the bottle she hurled it with all force on the floor, breaking it into a hundred sparkling fragments and flooding the room with its perfume. The scent soaked quickly into the heavy pile of the carpet, making a dark patch round the broken glass.

Henry Winton stood panting heavily, still holding her in his arms, stunned by the look of cruelty and hatred on Ruby's face, the face which had been so strikingly beautiful only a moment earlier and which was now contorted with rage. For the first time he noticed the hard, sulky lines round her mouth, the bitterness of the downward curling mouth, the intense malignity of the black,

pebble-sharp eyes. Her face was drained of all its softness, it no longer looked a live face; it looked more like one of those Japanese masks made to represent a single emotion: hatred. This was a woman who could kill.

'You half-caste slut' hissed Henry, gripping her shoulders hard until his fingers could squeeze no further. 'You dare to speak of my wife like that'—after being treated like a . . . like a respectable woman. You don't deserve anything better than your colony and your half breed lovers—your Eddie Trevors and God knows who else—speaking your own brand of the English language. You dare to speak to me like that, you chichi street walker!' And Henry pushed her away with all his force.

Ruby Miranda fell against the window in a crumpled heap, her shoulder hitting the window ledge and making her wince with pain. But she steadied herself and stood up. She was breathing heavily, and the lines round her face had deepened. She stared at Henry for a full minute standing in her high heels, exactly level with him.

'I will kill you for this, Henry Winton,' she said very coldly, her face looking more like a bloodless papier mache mask than ever. 'No matter how long it takes, I shall kill you for what you have done and what you have said. And as for Eddie Trevor, he will always be mine—my own. You can never understand a woman's infatuation for a man like Eddie. His is not pale, bloodless love, but fierce and burning and unbridled. No girl who has once been loved by a man like Eddie Trevor can love any other man—least of all someone like you. You, who would never be fit to wipe his shoes, Henry Winton!'

Ruby stamped out of the room. In the doorway she stopped and turned. 'You!' she said, and spat in his direction, just as he had seen the coolie women do in the streets.

For a long time, Henry sat in the gun room, reeking of the exotic, expensive perfume, puffing at a dead pipe, quite taken aback by Ruby's sudden burst of hysteria. It was all going smoothly just as he had planned, and then there was that unforeseen scene. Of course there would have been no scene at all if he had not kissed her, he reflected. Rather surprising, that that last bit of flare up from anyone as matter-of-fact as Ruby Miranda. But then one could never be sure of chichis. During the weeks before he went on leave, she had been docile as a Chinese concubine, so deliciously wanton

in the privacy of the bungalow, so prim and proper outside, calling him 'sir' and sending him little tidbits she had cooked. She had fallen into the pattern neatly, just as he had wished, building up a well-defined relationship agreeable to them both; and now, when it was all over, she just did not seem to realize that it was all over.

Had she expected him to marry her? Henry asked himself for the first time, and shivered at the very thought. He had never given her any cause to think that he would propose marriage, though God knows he had begun to think of it seriously just before he had gone on leave. The strike had saved him from that folly, the strike and Eddie Trevor, and, of course, Sudden Dart with his talk of the thin line.

On his part, he had always taken it for granted that Ruby had understood their relationship perfectly, understood it and accepted it. All bachelor planters had their mistresses, they had to have them, sometimes two or three at a time, mainly from among the coolie women, of course. Ruby knew that as well as anyone else. You couldn't live in the jungle for three year terms between home leaves without something like that to keep you sane. At that, he had been far more discriminating than most planters, choosing a woman who at least spoke his own language, after a fashion, and treating her with all possible consideration almost like a wife in fact. And this was all the thanks he got, for treating her with kindness and finding her a job in an all white club too. He could have easily dismissed her and she would have had to go back to Tinapur and marry some railway clerk or fireman and serve her damn well right too . . .

That had been the mistake then, treating her like a gentlewoman. And, to be sure, he had been faithful to her while it had lasted. But it couldn't go on for ever, Ruby knew the rules as well as anyone else.

'You can never tell with chichis,' Henry said to himself again. He relit his pipe and yelled for his number one boy.

'The bottle of scent fell down and broke,' he told the boy. 'Have the pieces swept up. And send for Sarkai babu, the schoolmaster.'

He received Sarkai in the verandah. 'I am promoting you to headmaster,' announced Henry. 'Miss Minanda has found another job and is leaving us.'

'Sahib is bhery kind,' said Sarkai, folding his hands and bowing low. 'Bhery kind.'

21

The Brindian Company at War

THE war came to the tea district, but slowly, almost apologetically, as though reluctant to disturb the serenity of the hills, making itself felt only in odd pin pricks such as the shortage of sugar and the rise in the price of gin and the disappearance from the market of Gillette blades. There was, of course, no doubt in anyone's mind that it was everybody's war that they would all be inexorably dragged into it sooner or later. At the same time, everyone was careful to behave as though it was almost unthinkingly to hustle the process.

The mood of the moment was sharply outlined in a personal letter sent by Sudden Dart to all his managers.

The Brindian Tea Company expects all its managers to stand by their jobs and do their duty in this hour of the Empire's need. Managers in turn, will pass on this instruction to the officials and coolies on their gardens. It is my firm conviction that every one of the Brindian Tea Company's servants will stand shoulder to shoulder behind the Company's war effort.

Life went on just as before. There were no abrupt changes, no sudden readjustment of standards, not even the remotest contact with death or destruction. There was hunting and fishing and golf at Chinnar, and the Chinnar Week was going to be bigger and better than ever. Sudden had decided to hold the Week in the middle of November so that some of his special guests could attend.

At the beginning of the war the home government introduced conscription for all men between eighteen and forty one. Men born in the United Kingdom, wherever they might be, could be called up for military service. Henry, who was well within the upper age limit prescribed, knew that he might be called up very soon, and he was eager to serve. At the same time he hoped for a respite of a few weeks so that Jean would have time to settle down at Silent Hill. The war was going to be a long war, and everyone was going to get

a chance of having a whack at the Germans. In the meantime, there was such a thing as a man's private longing for a held-over honeymoon to make you want to put off your getting into the war and go on living in the seclusion of Assam as long as possible.

And there was also a man's loyalty to a company such as the Bundian Tea Company.

But the one thing the war seemed to have done was to upset all shipping schedules. He had expected Jean to reach India in early October, but she had not yet turned up although it was now the middle of the month. The sooner she came, the longer they would be together. The thought of being together in the newly painted, re-furnished house on the hill was almost unbearably delicious. He waited for her with a longing that was close to physical pain.

Once again, life at Silent Hill was just as it had always been, and for no particular reason. Henry's thoughts went flitting back to that day, a year ago, when he had fired a shot at a kalij pheasant and had nearly hit Jugal Kishore's niece—Gauri. That's right, Gauri was her name, the fact that he had almost forgotten it was indicative of his peace of mind.

They had both gone, Jugal Kishore and Gauri. Jugal Kishore he was told had been elected to the Legislative Assembly by an overwhelming majority. His name appeared in the papers now and then usually in connection with some labour activity, but his speeches no longer seemed to be charged with their old virulence. Anyway, he now had the whole of Assam as his field of activities and not merely a tiny corner estate like Silent Hill. He had gone away to live in the capital and so had the woman he called his niece, Gauri.

Everything was just as he had hoped it would be when Jean came to live at Silent Hill, orderly, peaceful and serene.

Peaceful and serene except for the sight of the blood-red motorcycle flashing up and down the hill roads at great speed except for the maddening roar of the imputed exhaust reverberating in the hills a dozen times during the day and night except for the mid-night strains of concertina music coming from the most unexpected corners of the estate: Eddie Trevor, increasingly more cocky, more sure of himself, going through life like a hockey centre forward, with an excessive zest—and always, always, playing to an imaginary gallery.

'What did you think of Fddie Trevor, Sudden's find?' Henry asked Cockburn on Cockburn's last evening at Silent Hill.

Cockburn remained silent for some time, as though he were thinking out his answer. 'I found him a keen enough worker, but personally I doubt if you are going to be able to take to him ...

'You're quite right, I can't bear him,' said Henry.

'What do you object to in him, most?

'Everything, I suppose. The brashness, for one thing, the tendency either to cheek you or to kowtow. Then there's his attitude to the unfortunate coolies.'

'You'll have to go on curbing that. Otherwise you'll be having trouble on your hands again.'

'The coarseness! My God! The coarseness. I've never come across anyone who knows so many foul words in so many languages.'

'Yes, he's very good at languages,' agreed Cockburn. 'Speaks all the hill dialects, and then Bengali, Assamese, Hindi ...

'But why do you think he does it?'

'You can't complain about his work,' said Cockburn.

'No, he's keen, terribly keen, but perhaps bumptious is the word. He's forever doing the sort of thing that a man would do only for a dare. I hear he went up the rockface of Wallach's Folly from the south. That's the sort of crazy thing he's always up to. As though—as though he's forever trying to prove himself.'

Cockburn laughed, his gentle, almost tired laugh. 'And yet have you noticed how he typifies the sort of man whom women find irresistible?'

'I can't say I have. What can anyone see in a man like Trevor, the boulder type?' said Henry, but remembering, at the same time, that Ruby Miranda too had spoken of his fascination for women.

'You'd be surprised. It must be the helpless, earthy sincerity, the naiveté. And then there is that mobile face, half sad, but ready to smile ... I don't know. It's something, well, something instinctive ...

It's rather like the way men often fall for a particular kind of woman. You can't call them beautiful by any stretch of imagination, and yet they provoke the most uncontrollable longings in men who hardly know them. It's the same with some men. I should think ... women just can't resist them.

'You mean coolie women ...'

'I mean all women.'

'But what's he been up to? Has he been running round with any of the coolie women here?' Henry asked angrily.

'From what I can see, it seems to be the other way round, they don't seem able to leave him alone. You know how quite shamelessly demonstrative some of the Khasies can be. . . .'

'They must be crazy. They can have him for all I care, and he can keep his hill women, so long as he doesn't . . . well, so long as the husbands don't come complaining to me.'

'I don't think there's any danger of that,' said Cockburn. 'He's smooth; Trevor is what they call a smooth operator.'

'I just can't bear him just detest the type.'

'I can understand that perfectly, but then I must say I find it easy enough to get on with almost anyone in India. I can only sympathize with you.' Then Cockburn added, 'But why don't you try and get rid of him?'

'Get rid of him? Don't you know he's a sort of blue eyed boy of Sudden's? and I expect he trades on it rather heavily. It's not going to be easy to get rid of him. I opposed his coming here in the beginning, but Sudden wouldn't play up.'

'Don't be a babe in arms, surely that should make it all the easier to get rid of him.'

'Will you kindly explain please,' asked Henry.

Cockburn had begun to chuckle softly once again. 'Try recommending him, my dear fellow. For special promotion. It's always worth a try and who knows, Sudden might jump at it.'

'Sort of try to kick him upstairs, you mean?'

'You've got it. What does it matter to you where he goes, so long as he goes away from here? Start praising him in your weekly reports and recommend him for accelerated advancement, you might even make a personal request to Sudden. You've a lot of pull with the old boy.'

'That's certainly an idea worth trying,' Henry said cautiously. 'if an opportunity should present itself.'

The opportunity, as it happened, came almost ready made.

On 16 October, Sudden called a meeting of his managers. Everyone went, looking forward to a long Friday-to Monday weekend at the company's expense. On Saturday morning, as they all sat against the wall in Sudden's elegant rosewood-panelled office, Henry happened to notice that there were only twenty-six managers pre-

sent. Barnet had not turned up. This was an important meeting, and he found himself wondering why Barnet had not come.

'I called this meeting,' said Sudden, addressing his managers, 'to discuss with you our war measures. I shall get down to that presently. But before that I should like to take up a more . . . er, more urgent matter that I am suddenly confronted with.' Sudden paused to light his cigar before he continued, 'I'm afraid Barnet has let me down . . . let us all down. He's resigned and gone away to join the Navy.'

'I think many of us will have to be going sooner than we think, those who are liable for conscription,' put in Williamson, one of the senior managers. 'And many others would like to join up, even though they may not be liable to conscription.'

'I'm quite aware of that, Mr. Williamson,' said Sudden, glowering at him. 'I have no doubt that every one of us here wants to join up. But we can't all afford to be selfish and irresponsible about it. We cannot let the company down.'

'When can we expect that those of us who are liable to conscription will be called up, sir?' asked Henry.

'Never, I hope. Things are pretty quiet just now,' said Sudden. 'I don't doubt the BEF will be in Berlin within six months at the most. . . .'

'I wouldn't be too sure of that, sir, said young Macdonald. 'According to the *Chicago Tribune* survey, it may take years. We have no 'planes, it seems, and we have a frightful shortage of precision instruments. The Germans have been preparing for years!'

'Macdonald, you can take my word that the Hun will be knocked out sooner than the Americans imagine,' answered Sudden, as though speaking from a secret knowledge of military plans. 'Chap at the War Office was telling Jock Macdonald that we have as many as eight thousand bombers ready. Apart from that, I should like to warn you that we mustn't give expression to such thoughts as you have just expressed, Macdonald. They're pure defeatism. If the Indians hear us say such things, how can you expect them to have faith in our victory—our quick victory?'

'I'm sorry sir,' said Macdonald, very red in the face.

'Anyway, when can we expect to be released from our obligations to the company so that those of us who are above conscription age can volunteer?' asked Williamson.

'We shall have to wait until I am able to get a policy decision from the London office. I am trying to get all of us, the planters, to be declared essential service; even the younger ones.'

'Planters essential to the war effort?' Williamson voiced the general feeling.

'If you only knew the importance tea assumes in a British war, with the British Tommy, as ever, doing the bulk of the fighting . . . God bless him—you wouldn't entertain any such doubt, Williamson. Tea has always been a major weapon of a British war,' Sudden explained. 'That being so, how am I to keep twenty-seven gardens in full production if all of you want to go off and play at soldiers and sailors—with the Indians waiting to create hell's own trouble at the slightest opportunity? I don't think many of you have had the misfortune of witnessing a strike such as I saw at Silent Hill nine months ago. That's what we shall have happening everywhere.'

Sudden paused and drew on his cigar, looking at them expectantly, giving them a chance to come out with whatever they were thinking, but no one seemed to have anything to say.

There's conscription of all British subjects, of course,' Sudden went on. 'Unless we can get our work declared essential service. I'm afraid those of you who are within the prescribed age limits will just have to go as soon as your call up comes. But I certainly disapprove of Barnet's desertion. That's what I call it, desertion—showing a total lack of loyalty to Brindian in general and to me in particular.'

'But you don't really think they'll go and declare planters essential, sir?' asked Macdonald.

'They will, if the War Office has any sense. And in that case I can bring down the law on the heads of people like Barnet. I should like to warn all of you here and now that anyone who leaves here unless conscripted goes at his own risk. His job will not be held open for him until he returns.'

Sudden paused to let that sink in, running his eyes round the room. Then he said, 'In the meantime, the first thing I have to do is to find a suitable replacement for Barnet. Anyone any of you can suggest?'

'I would have suggested Trevor's name, sir,' said Henry, it was only after the words were out of his mouth that he realized what he had said—'if it weren't for the fact that he has hardly been with us a year,' he added.

Sudden pulled at his cigar for a while before he spoke. 'Eddie Trevor? D'you think he'll be up to it? How will the damned coolies take him? I don't want them staging demonstrations.'

'They eat out of his hands, now, sir. Just adore him,' said Henry, hoping that Sudden wouldn't think he sounded too eager. He gave a quick glance at Cockburn and was rewarded with an approving nod.

'I'm sure Captain Cockburn will bear me out, sir,' Henry went on. 'He's seen much more of Trevor than I have, of course.'

'I think he would do very well, Sudden,' said Cockburn.

'Well, that may be the answer. Thank you, Henry,' Sudden said, nodding his head and looking very pleased with himself. There will be a few complications, about his coming here—wanting to use the Club and all that. But I'm sure all that can be sorted out with a little . . . er, a little finesse.'

'I don't think that should prove very difficult,' Henry assured him. 'He's a very sensible young man.'

'Good. And he's not affected by this conscription, not being from the home country. It'll certainly be a hell of a jump for him from stockman to manager. You will have to make a full report on him, Henry, recommending his name for special promotion. Only then can I push forward the papers to London. I wouldn't say anything to Trevor just yet; the board at home will have to confirm the appointment. So a lot depends on the way we push the thing from this end . . . Dammit, this is the first time we shall be recommending a . . . you know, someone who isn't a pucca sahib for a managership. But of course they'll understand. There's a war on, dammit!'

'I think he'll do very well,' said Henry, and looked at Cockburn again and lifted his hand sufficiently to show him that he was keeping his fingers crossed.

'You send in a recommendation then, Henry,' said Sudden. 'And I will push it on to the directors at home. Now let us get down to the main business. The war, as you know gentlemen, is creeping up on us; making things more and more difficult here. I hear that Scotch whisky has gone up to a hundred and fifty rupees the case in Calcutta, and no doubt it will go up much more. Our life, so far away from everywhere, has always been a life of hardship, of sacrifice; and we must . . . er . . . must face up to these new afflictions with fortitude; in the full knowledge that even though we are so far away from the battlefields, we are playing a vital role in the

war effort of the Empire. At the same time, we must take steps not to be . . . caught with our pants down by growing shortages of these . . . er, little comforts and consolations our English way of life demands. What I propose to do is to set up a separate fund, beginning with fifty thousand rupees, so that we can buy up whatever stocks we can lay our hands on of White Horse and Haig whisky and cartridges for our shoots here and Frank Cooper's marmalade. . . .'

It was the practical approach to the situation, of course; and yet Henry could not help feeling a little guilty within himself. It was no doubt important to lay in stocks of English-made goods and defeat the profiteering of the Calcutta Marwaries, but it was not easy to connect this with the war effort.

A committee was immediately set up to administer the new fund and to make large-scale purchases of Scotch whisky and Gordon's gin and English biscuits and tinned asparagus and Kiwi boot polish, and Greys and Markovitch cigarettes and Crosse and Blackwell and Frank Cooper's marmalade, and all those other little things which, according to a list prepared by the purchasing committee, could bring comfort to the life of an Englishman in exile. It was also decided to send one of the committee members to Calcutta to round up these stocks from the wholesalers, and to replenish them from time to time.

Almost characteristically, it was Eddie Trevor, careering madly about on his noisy red motor-cycle, who brought the war into Silent Hill. Trevor asked to see Henry at his bungalow a couple of days after Henry's return from the meeting at Chinnar, and although Henry had been irritated at the thought of being disturbed outside office hours, he had agreed to see him.

Henry wondered what Trevor could be wanting to see him about. Had he already learned that he had been recommended for a post as manager? Or was there something else on his mind?—and the thought went flashing through his brain: did he want to speak to him about Ruby Miranda?

But it was neither his promotion nor Ruby Miranda. What Trevor wanted to talk about was the war.

It seemed that he had already applied for a commission in the army and had been called up for an interview at the Eastern Command headquarters at Naini Tal. Eddie was quite excited about it. He wanted a week's leave.

'The war will be over and done with in a jiffy,' he said to Henry. 'I don't want to be left out.'

Henry was annoyed that Trevor should have applied to join the army without first seeking his permission.

'I can't very well not give you the leave,' he said to Trevor. 'but it is quite certain that head office will take a dim view of your sending off an application without giving any intimation to the company. Dammit! there is such a thing as loyalty to one's employer! I don't know what policy they are going to adopt towards those of you who do not come under the conscription laws and yet want to join up. I think it is only fair to warn you though, that it looks as though Sudden . . . the Resident Director is determined not to keep their jobs open.'

Trevor's reply had shaken Henry.

'Who cares? I'm quite prepared to give up my job. I know I'll make a couple of hundred chips anywhere but when will I get another chance to fight in a damn war?'

'I wonder if you would still be so eager to join up,' said Henry, 'if I were to tell you that you would not be giving up a two-hundred a month job but a seven hundred a month job, that you were going to be appointed manager of the Lower Tista estate, in place of Mr. Barnet.'

That was the first time Henry had seen Trevor quite overcome by emotion and, oddly enough, it had the effect of making him look humble, and perhaps for that reason, even likable as though the harsh varnish of artificiality had cracked and fallen off, bringing out the inner man, a sincere and somewhat shy youth. Was that what Cockburn had been talking about when he spoke of his fascination for women? Henry wondered.

'What's that? Manager? Oh no. Mr. Winton!'

'That's what I said. I have recommended you, and the Resident Director has accepted my recommendation.'

'Manager? Oh my! I don't know how I can ever thank you enough, Mr. Winton,' said Trevor, his face radiant, his eyes shining with gratitude. 'I had never hoped to become a manager in all my life!'

'There you are, then,' said Henry, feeling considerably mollified. 'There's really no hurry about joining up, is there? Later on it is quite likely that the company will have to permit some of us who are young enough to go into the forces. And then they will jolly

well have to hold open our jobs for us until we get back. . . .'

Eddie Trevor shook his head. 'No, sir; that makes no difference. I want to go, and I want to go soon. Whether I am a manager, for which, again, thank you very much, or even something bigger than a manager, I don't want to stop here, not when there is a war on—not even if I were the Governor of Assam!'

Eddie Trevor had gone back to his usual form. The softness had gone out of him. But Henry could not make up his mind whether it was still the sincere, natural youth talking to him from a genuine keenness to get into the fighting, or the player-to-the-gallery once again trying to prove himself. And because he could not be sure, he found himself detesting Trevor all the more.

'But I am warning you,' he told Trevor sharply, 'this opportunity may never come again. They will not be holding your job for you here, and at the end of the war there will be a flood of ex-soldiers and sailors from home, waiting to come here. Then it will be quite out of the question to take on a . . . take on an Anglo-Indian as one of the company managers. Now's your chance—'

'The hell I care,' bellowed Eddie Trevor 'Thank you very much for your recommendation, Mr. Winton. I shall always remember your kindness. But I want to join up—and I want to go soon.'

'But what makes you so sure you will get a commission,' Henry said in irritation, 'when they want people who have matriculated? What happens if you're not accepted?'

Eddie Trevor had looked almost hurt. 'Why, Mr. Winton,' he answered very coldly, 'in that case I go and join the ranks. A chap doesn't have to have a commission to get into the war, dammit.'

22

A Corner in a Market

AT last Jean was coming. Henry Winton was waiting for her on the platform at Tinapur railway station. The agony of separation, the anxiety of waiting for a ship in wartime were fast drawing to a close.

'ullo, Mr. Wilson,' said someone. 'ow far?'

Even without turning, Henry knew it was Mr. Henderson, the station-master. He will always go on calling me Wilson, thought Henry. But to-day he did not mind.

'I'm not going anywhere myself; I'm expecting my wife,' he said proudly.

'I 'ear Eddie Trevor has got his King's commission.'

'I don't know. I know he went up for the interview. The results have not been announced yet.'

'It's all over the colony,' said Henderson. 'Ah, there she is, the Calcutta Mail—right on time!'

There she was, right on time; and there was Jean, hatless and wearing tweed tailor-mades and looking just a little unfamiliar, waving wildly from a first-class window. He got her things out and had them stacked in the back seat of the Austin, and she sat in front with him, still clutching a cardboard box. She was full of the war and talked of little else besides the submarine scare and the no-smoking, no-lights rule on the ship, and how they were digging shelters all over Regent's Park, and how London was cluttered up with sandbags, and how they were putting up ack-ack sites all over the country because of the bombers.

'Is that your gas-mask?' asked Henry as soon as they were on their way.

'They call them respirators now. Everyone was issued with one at home. When will you be called up, Henry? You must join the Green Howards—such a pretty hat-badge! I've got one, I'll show you. We had a whole lot of Green Howards with us on the Strath-

more. And did you know the whole of the Suez Canal area is guarded by our Indian boys?’

‘Indian boys!’

‘Dogras and Punjabis, y’know. I’m sure some of the jawans in Daddy’s battalion were there. It was wonderful to see them, Henry, and to think how safe everything was, just because they were out there, guarding the canal. So stern, so straight, so disciplined; living in tents on those hot, hot sands!’

‘I expect they’re all used to it, you know,’ said Henry. ‘They like the heat.’

‘Once we were so close, we threw things to them from the boat. . .’

‘You what?’

‘Gifts, you know; tins of fruit and biscuits and cigarettes and magazines. That’s what the Green Howards said the Indian boys would relish. And you know what happened, Henry?’

‘No.’

‘Well, the sepoy stood just as they were, like Guardsmen, not even looking at our gifts, and a whole lot of scruffy-looking Arabs rushed forward and began to help themselves. And then do you know what happened, Henry?’

‘I wasn’t there, darling,’ Henry pointed out.

‘The Punjabi subahdar, a big, hefty man with a fierce moustache, yelled at them in Hindi, and the whole crowd slunk back as though they had been whipped. Oh, how we cheered! The Green Howards asked me what he said to them. But I couldn’t very well tell them, you know. It was . . . it was one of those terribly unprintable things the Indian boys are for every saying. . . .’

‘The one about the sister molester?’

‘That, and the one about the mother too. I couldn’t tell the Green Howards, could I, Henry? . . . such foul language. But I could have jumped out and hugged that subahdar.’

‘What about hugging me instead?’ suggested Henry.

‘Don’t be silly; not while you’re driving. It’s not safe. I don’t want to go down into the khud just when our honeymoon is beginning. Would you like to join the Green Howards, Henry? Because Major Cameron said he could easily get you in. All we have to do is to write to String. He’s a fine chap, String; not thirty yet, and a major on the staff at GHQ. And absolutely crazy about me. It was String who gave me his silver hat-badge.’

‘String?’

'Major Cameron; everyone calls him String.'

'And were you crazy about him too?'

'I'm crazy about you, darling! And I had no time to be crazy about anyone else! Tell me, there can be hardly anyone I know at Chinnai. I expect everyone must have gone by now . . .'

'Gone where?'

'Why, joined up, of course!'

'No, they're all there, waiting for the call up, just like me. At least, nearly all. One man's deserted, a man called Barnett.'

'He's gone and joined the army?'

'The Navy. But all of us take rather a dim view of such thrusting. Sudden was furious. It is very important to stay put where you are and go on doing your job until they send for you.'

'I expect it is. Did you know Daddy's volunteered again?'

'Besides, tea's a very important weapon of war.'

'Tea!'

'Troops can't fight without tea, British troops.'

'Good old Tommy! So no one from your garden has gone?'

'One man has put in for a commission, chap called Trevor.'

'Trevor. Do I know him? Was he at the Week? The name sounds familiar.'

'No, you're not likely to have met him.'

'But how wonderful! Shall I write and tell String to take him into the Green Howards?'

'The Green Howards wouldn't take him. He's a Eurasian. Besides, he's rather the boulder type, not the type one recommends.'

'You don't like him much, do you, Henry?'

'No. Rather cheek, this, wanting to go off without giving a damn. Poor Sudden will have a hell of a time trying to find a replacement. Just when I had recommended him for promotion too.'

'When is he going?'

'He went before the interview board last week. He's just returned, cocksure that he's been accepted. Damned cheek, I think, going in for a commission, but they can't be too particular in wartime.'

'Think they'll take him?'

'I don't know. He hasn't the educational qualifications. They want them at least to have matriculated, and they don't usually make any exceptions. But you never know. Do you know what the Brigadier chap, the President of the interview board, asked him? Whether he played any games.'

'Did he?—I mean, does he?'

'He only played for India at the Berlin Olympics!—hockey. But he plays cricket and football too. So he just produced a file of his press cuttings, and that was that. They never asked him another question.'

'So they might take him; I do hope they do.'

'As I said, only if they are prepared to make a special case. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner he goes the better. After all . . . oh, damn!—Damn!'

Henry was just taking the last, left-handed hairpin bend into the Silent Hill township when from the opposite direction came a monstrous red motor-cycle driven at great speed by a rider who had put both his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket.

'Damn!' Henry cursed again, 'Disgraceful! Bloody shocking driving!'

As he flashed past them, manoeuvring his motor-cycle cleanly through the just-wide-enough gap between their car and the parapet wall, riding with body and legs as though he were mounted on a horse, the rider held up both his hands and waved at their car.

'That's the man,' said Henry. 'That's Eddie Trevor. You shouldn't have waved back at him.'

'Oh, but I do know him,' said Jean. 'He was on the Rawalpindi when Daddy went home on retirement. I remember now, the Indian Hockey team travelled with us in the same boat. He was very popular with everyone. We even won a competition together. He's wonderful dancer.'

Later the same evening, in the privacy of their bedroom overlooking the valley, Eddie Trevor once again came breaking into their lives. They were lying side by side, spent and relaxed, and Henry had just lit a cigarette. She was wearing the sheerest and shortest of night gowns he had been able to buy in Lewis's store at Port Said. There was only the faint blue night light beside the bed, the rest was darkness.

'I want a drink,' said Henry. 'What about you?'

'No, thank you.'

'I'm going to get myself a whisky-and-water. Mind if I put on the light?'

'Don't be silly, of course I don't.'

Jean did not seem to mind the light. In a sense, it represented her

whole attitude to love-making, Henry found himself thinking, altogether different from Ruby Miranda's. It was a wilder, less restrained, even more aggressive, more demanding, more exhausting kind of love-making—not the kind which thrived only in darkness. Even to think of it sent a delightful tingle through his body. He switched on the light and gazed at her fondly, gold-limbed, patchily tanned during her voyage, lying with her legs curled up, her flimsy, pale-yellow night-gown well above her waist, and her gold, shoulder-length hair shining brightly in the harsh light.

He came back with his whisky-and-water and sat down by her side. 'You've lost a little weight,' he remarked.

'Oh, good! I've been trying to. Where?'

'Here, and here.'

'Oooh, your hand's cold! No, no, don't take it away, darling. Let me warm it for you. Give me the other hand too. This one's even colder.'

'I've been holding the drink in that one. This is the nicest way of warming one's hands I can think of. Shall I put the light out?'

'No, I like to look at you, darling. Don't you like to look at me? I went to such trouble to get my tan . . .'

'I love the untanned parts best,' said Henry

'I shall try to get an all over brown now,' went on Jean

'You have to be careful of the sun in the hills,' Henry warned her

'What's that?' she asked suddenly, holding up her hand. 'Listen!'

Somewhere far away, someone was playing a concertina, and the clear mountain air was carrying its strains right into the room

'Damn!' said Henry. 'Oh, damn!'

The music became clearer and louder, as though it were being tuned in, and then a rich baritone voice joined it in song:

A coin in a casket,
A bird in a basket,
A corner in a market
Falling down, falling down

'Shall I shut the window?' asked Henry.

'Oh, no, please, darling. It's lovely.'

'What on earth is it?'

'A Corner in a Market. Everyone's singing it at home. Wonder how it got here, all the way to Silent Hill. And he's singing it beautifully. Who is it?'

'That man Eddie Trevor.'

'He sang at the ship's concert, I remember. He was very good. D'you think we could hear better from the verandah? Let's go and see.'

She pushed Henry's hands away and got up from her bed 'Please give me my house-coat'

Out in the verandah, the music could be heard much more clearly. It was coming from the opposite hill. The valley below them was flooded in moonlight

'I think he's sitting on top of Wallach's Folly, said Henry

'Wallach's Folly?'

'That hill there Man who was the manager here before me - chap called Wallach- put up steps for going to the top Before that it was unclimbable But the company refused to reimburse the money he had spent -quite rightly too That's why it's called Wallach's Folly

'How far is it?'

'About a mile by the path hardly five hundred yards straight across the valley, as the crow flies

'Will you take me up one day? How clear it sounds

'Any day you choose To-morrow if you like

They had put cushions on the stone steps of the verandah and they sat facing the dark, conical hill looming beyond the silver valley Jean listened raptly to the song her eyes closed and then she picked up the tune herself and began to hum

'Let's go in ' said Henry I'm beginning to feel cold

A Corner in a Market, falling down, falling down,' Jean was singing in a clear, silvery voice

'Shush' whispered Henry 'He might hear you darling'

'Couldn't we call him over or go and join him, and then we could all sit down and have a proper sing song'

He'll be going away soon said Henry, 'if they take him for the first course at the officers' training school at Belgaum'

'Ought we to ask him over before he goes if they do take him? Make a little fuss?'

'Ask him over? Make a fuss?'

'But darling' He'll be the first man from Silent Hill to be going to the wars a sort of hero really You don't know how all the fighting men get fussed over at home. Mother is on one of the committees with Lady Haverell as the chairman to arrange for soldiers and

sailors to spend week-ends with the hoity-toities. Everyone is clamouring to be allowed to entertain soldiers. . . .'

'But this is India; it's slightly different here. Besides, sahibs don't go getting all social with Turasians, here. Sudden would throw a fit if he got to hear of it.'

'Oh, to hell with Sudden,' Jean snapped with a vehemence that took Henry aback. 'You don't have to go treating him as though you were still at school and Sudden was the headmaster. Sudden's got to realize there's a war on, that it makes no difference whether the blood you spill is English or only half English or not at all English. Think how safe I felt coming to join you here because of our Indian boys guarding the Canal. . . .'

'I do wish you wouldn't keep referring to them as "our Indian boys".'

'Why not? Daddy was Indian army. Besides. . . .'

'Somehow it doesn't sound right. Our boys will be our boys, yours and mine, and thank God they won't be Indian boys! We'll have two boys and two girls. . . .'

'Only two and two?

Henry leaned close to her. 'Come to bed,' he whispered

'Pull me up.'

Henry stood over her and pulled her up and held her tightly in his arms, and she drew his head down and kissed him, and again it was one of those long, breathless kisses that went on and on hungrily, banking up the fires within him and filling him with a delicious, uncontrollable longing.

'Come to bed,' he whispered 'now.'

'Take me in your arms,' she ordered, putting her own arms tightly around his neck. 'I 'll' me up I am the bride see and you didn't carry me into your house when we came this morning.

'This morning all the servants were waiting to welcome you with garlands.'

'You can carry me in now, there are no servants with garlands.'

He picked her up in his arms and she snuggled close to his body, wrapping herself about him, her arms still clinging tightly round his shoulders. She was light and soft and warm in his hands, and fragrant, and she was singing sottly to herself

A coin in a casket,
A bird in a basket,
A corner in a market,
Falling down falling down

He carried her into the house in triumph, like a prize won in battle, through the verandah and the passage, and then all the way through the sitting-room and into their bedroom, and gently deposited her on the bed. But even then Jean did not release her hold.

'Kiss me first,' she whispered, pulling his head down, 'another kiss like that last one.'

23

Mating Call

THEY did not go up Wallach's Folly the next day. They were having tea on the lawn at the side of the bungalow when Henry told her they could not go. Jean had handed him his second cup of tea.

'More cake?' Jean asked.

'Please.' He held out his plate. Then he said casually, so as not to alarm her, 'I'm afraid we'll have to keep Herman tied up for a few days, and also put off Wallach's Folly.'

'Oh, why?'

'Listen to that,' said Henry. 'The hoot. Can you hear it?'

From somewhere in the jungle all round them came a melancholy booming call, 'Ooooo . . . Ooooo . . . Oooo!'

'Oh, that? I've been meaning to ask you. It has been going on for the last half-hour. So depressing, isn't it? Is it some kind of bird?'

'Python,' Henry told her.

'A python! Here?'

'Tea and pythons, they both thrive in the same sort of climatic conditions. Where tea grows, pythons must be expected.'

'But here? Near the bungalow?'

'Not necessarily. You can't tell within half a mile. They are exceptionally good ventriloquists . . . There! See what I mean?'

'Oooo . . . Oooo . . . Oooo,' came the sound again, much louder now, and from an entirely new direction.

'It's their mating call. Amazing how the sex instinct affects the animal world. But this call often means that it is also going to rain. They love the rain for their love-making.'

Jean shrugged her shoulders in a gesture of revulsion and made a face. 'Are they . . . are they dangerous, Henry?' she asked.

'Only if they're taken by surprise. Then they'll attack anything within range. And once they get their teeth into something, well, that's the end. Their teeth can work only one way, downwards;

they can't let go even if they have latched on to something which is too big to swallow. It's just a one-way passage.'

'Can they swallow a human-being?'

'A really big one might, but never from choice. Only if it were taken by surprise. But they always crush their victims first; I mean, before swallowing them. In the old days they used to keep pythons for trials by ordeal. The culprit's body used to be greased so that he should have a chance.'

'Ughhh! How big are they, Henry?'

'The usual length is between fifteen and twenty feet, and I have shot one twenty-five feet long; the usual weight is about two hundred pounds. . . .'

'Two hundred pounds!'

'Often much more; and some of the coolies swear they have seen pythons of forty and fifty feet long. But you know how they exaggerate.'

'But what shall we do, Henry? That means we can't even step out of this place. And I shall be having nightmares every time you go on your rounds.'

Henry laughed more to reassure her than for any other reason.

'Pythons are not all that dangerous; not to human beings. Of course, the coolies who work in the jungle have to be damned careful because they often run slap into them. At the same time, they can be pretty dangerous to animals—animals are their natural food; and old Herman would be just the right size. I'll go and blow its head off once someone has located where it's lying up. . . . It's all right; you can tell by the boom. Listen! -Notice how it vibrates' That's the male. Anyway, until they find where he's camping. I'd just as soon not go off the roads. And we'll have to put off going to Wallach's Folly to some other time.'

'Will they be able to locate him easily?'

'Not from the sounds; at least, not without a good many day's laborious tracking. But now we know there's a python around, the coolies will keep their eyes skinned, and come and tell me when they locate him. It means baksheesh too; the first man who comes and tells me will get five chips. Pythons leave quite big tracks wherever they go in search of a girl friend . . . marks as big as from motor tyres. . . . Someone's bound to locate the thing in a day or two, and then I'll go and blow it to bits. Which reminds me: I'd better try out the new cartridges I brought out from England. I don't think

we shall be getting any more big-game ammunition out here for a long time—ah, I told you it might rain!

The wind came whistling up the Koyna gorge and rose to a roar, and heavy, dark, low-flying clouds came up from nowhere and covered the view as though with a gauze curtain. Even as the servants were rushing about taking the tea things in, large hail-stones were drumming against the tiles and hitting the verandah steps and bounding away in all directions.

Leaning against the wooden verandah railing, Jean looked moodily at the storm and said, 'I'm not going to step out of the house until I know the . . . the thing has been killed.'

'I shouldn't worry all that much,' said Henry reassuringly. 'It's not really dangerous. Except for dogs. Herman mustn't go off into the jungle on his own until this is over.'

The next morning was clear and bright, and when Jean woke up Henry was already in the gun-room, carrying out his weekly gun-oiling. The number one boy stood beside him handing out cleaning rods and bits of four-by-two flannelette. There was the big four-sixty-five double by Roland Lock, his elephant rifle, and then there was his special love, a shining blue, walnut-stocked, heavily engraved Holland and Holland shotgun with the detachable side-locks. From the way he handled it, Jean could see he loved the Holland, rubbing the stock with his fingers and wiping out the last vestige of surplus oil from the barrels again and again until they shone like mirrors. After that came the two smaller rifles, the two-fifty-six Mauser and the Remington bolt action two-two. And last of all the old Manton shotgun with its old-fashioned cocking hammers. Every weapon was always cleaned and oiled, always beautifully shining, ready for instant use. They were all taken out every Tuesday morning and oiled and cleaned even if they had not been used during the previous week.

'I wonder how long this room is going to go on stinking of perfume,' said Jean, wrinkling her nose.

'Most of the stuff got soaked into the carpet, when the bottle broke,' said Henry.

'Was it a big bottle, darling?' asked Jean. 'I do wish it hadn't got smashed even before I could see it. But you'll buy me another, just as big, won't you, darling . . . ?'

'Shush!' said Henry, holding up his hand and cocking his head to one side.

The python was still about. 'Oooo . . . Oooo . . . Oooo,' came the call, even louder than on the previous day.

'Getting impatient for love, isn't he?' remarked Henry, rising. 'With all that rain last night. Come,' he said to Jean.

They went and sat side by side on the verandah steps. Henry ordered a mali to put up a target on one of the trees beyond the lawn on the side of the bungalow. The target was a white-painted cardboard circle about twelve inches in diameter. 'That'll do,' Henry told the mali when he had reached the correct distance. The mali nailed the disc to the trunk of a big blue-pine tree which stood close to the edge of the valley.

'D'you think that's a hundred yards?' asked Henry.

'More, darling. At least a hundred and fifty.'

Henry broke open a fresh box of cartridges, loaded two cigar-sized shells into his four-sixty-five, and knelt down and aimed.

'This is going to be a trifle noisy,' he told Jean. 'You'd better keep your ears closed.'

The first two shots went crashing into the valley, one after the other. Even before the sound had died out, Henry unloaded and broke another box of cartridges and loaded the rifle again and fired two more shots. In all he opened five boxes and tested two rounds from each box. Then he sent the mali to bring back the target.

'What do you think?' he asked Jean, who had sat beside him all the time, showing her the neat round punctures made in the white cardboard disc. 'All ten shots within six inches.'

'Is that very good?'

'With a heavy rifle, yes.'

'Darling, you're a wonderful shot,' said Jean. 'The best in the world.'

Arm-in-arm, they went back into the gun-room, and Henry sat down to clean the heavy rifle once again.

'Doesn't your shoulder hurt?' enquired Jean.

'No. She kicks like hell, of course, but one has to hold her tight. It's just a trick, really.'

'All the boys came out to watch.'

'They always do; sort of tamasha for them. Now all we have to do is wait until someone brings the khabbar, and Mrs. Winton, you've got your python-skin shoes.'

'Darling, you're a lovely man,' said Jean, nuzzling the back of his neck. 'Quite the hairiest male I know, even if you are reeking of perfume.'

'I've been sitting on that damned carpet,' Henry explained. 'That means I've got all of ninety cartridges for the Big Bertha, all firing sweetly. That's a lot of fire-power, with me shooting as I shot just now. Should last me all through the war, even if the war lasts three years, as Chamberlain has been saying it might. Have I stopped being a lovely man?'

'Not yet.'

'Then kiss me again, please. It feels nice.'

When Henry reached his office that day, Trevor was waiting to see him.

'Good morning, sir, I've come to ask a favour.'

'Yes?'

'There's a damn boa constrictor in the garden.'

'Not boa, python.'

'Same, no?'

'Well, not quite.'

'My! the coolies are all scared green. Many of them came asking me why I don't shoot the boa . . . the python.'

That was the sort of thing Eddie Trevor was always trying to do. Anything to attract the limelight, Henry reflected. But then you couldn't be an international hockey star without wanting to push yourself into the limelight all the time.

'You weren't by any chance thinking of going to look for it, were you?' asked Henry.

'I've no gun, sir. I wanted to ask you for a gun and some cartridges. What would you use for a python, Mr. Winton?'

'A buckshot, preferably two bucks! ot, put only in the head—and then two more, just to make sure and then two more again—all in the head.'

'I know that. No use shooting a python anywhere else but the head.'

'Have you shot anything before?'

'Plenty. Fred Miranda has a gun, a Tolly's and so has Mervin Henderson, the SM. I have shot pig and buck and even a sambhar. Once I sat up for a panther too, but couldn't get him. Chum had killed . . .'

Henry wasn't interested in knowing about Trevor's panther. 'But don't you know you can't go looking for a python?—chasing the source of the calls? And if any of the coolies bring the khabbar, I'd much rather go and finish him off myself.'

'But I do mean to go looking for him, Mr. Winton, sir. Go out and find him. Pasupati is going with me. He says he can easily find the boa . . . python.'

'Kistulal's son? I suppose he can find it if he sets out to, if he's anything like as good as his father was. But it may take days . . . and miles and miles of trudging round in circles. Dangerous too.'

'I don't mind that, Mr. Winton; please, sir. I wanted to give a python skin bag to my girl; set of bag and shoes and belt to match,' and Trevor grinned ingratiatingly.

'All right. There's an old twelve-bore lying in the bungalow, left behind by Mr. Wallach. It's got cocking hammers. I can let you have that gun, and some buckshot. But don't go taking any foolish risks. It's a dangerous business.'

'Thanks, sir; I don't mind the danger, not at all,' said Trevor, looking very pleased. 'If I had a proper rifle, I'd even go for the Tista one-tusker. Pasupati says he will be able to track it down.'

'All right, Trevor, but on the condition that if any of the coolies on the garden comes with the khabbar, I should be most upset if you tried to take him on. Because in that case, I shall do the shooting myself. You can have a go only if you can find him yourself. Is that quite clear?

'Quite clear, Mr. Winton,' said Eddie Trevor.

Throughout the whole of Tuesday, the booming, vibrating Oooo . . . Oooo went on intermittently, sounding maddeningly close at times and quite far away at others. It was a curiously unnerving experience even for Henry, who had shot at least half a dozen pythons, and poor Herman seemed to shiver every time it heard the call. But none of the coolies had come across the python's tracks.

The next morning, when Jean and Henry were sitting down to breakfast in the verandah, the python was still calling.

'I hardly slept a wink,' complained Jean, 'with that going on most of the night.'

'They move around rather a lot when they get the sex urge, and one of the coolies is bound to run into its tracks. . . . Blast!'

A single shot rang out deep in the valley below them and its

report went crashing again and again to and fro between the two hills.

'I hope the bloody fool has managed to kill it; that he's got it in the head,' said Henry.

'What will happen if he hasn't?' asked Jean.

'I hardly like to think about it.'

'Will the python kill Mr. Trevor?'

'Pythons don't kill. They mostly swallow their prey alive—but rarely human-beings.'

'Then why did you say it was dangerous?'

'Did I? Well, if you happen to wound one, then it lashes out, and if it manages to get its teeth into some part of your body . . . well, that's the end. They can't let go, and they get their tails round some tree and then go into coils, getting smaller and smaller, squeezing whatever they have caught, crushing the bones so that whatever it is makes a soft, easy mouthful. The victim is usually alive as he enters the gullet, head first. . . .'

'Don't Henry, please!'

'Perhaps he's managed to blow off the head with just one shot. But I warned him to fire at least two more, even if he had managed to get a head shot. On the other hand, he may have fired the shot at a pheasant . . . free use of a gun. Please pass the butter.'

Twenty minutes later, just as they were finishing breakfast, they heard the sound of the motor-cycle.

'I wonder what that means. Has he shot it or has he created an emergency? He took a man out with him,' said Henry. 'Blast him! — he seems to be coming up the drive here!'

'Let's hope he's coming to tell you he has shot the thing,' said Jean.

'Could be,' Henry answered doubtfully. 'But don't go asking him to join us at breakfast or anything.'

The red motor-cycle came through the gate of the bungalow. Eddie Trevor was wearing Jodhpurs and his leather jacket, and a green beret at a rakish angle. Behind him sat Pasupati, Kistulal's son, carrying the old Manton with the cocking hammers slung across his chest. Trevor brought the motor-cycle to a smooth halt just beside the steps of the verandah.

'Good morning, sir! Good morning, Mrs. Winton!' said Trevor, taking off his beret with a sweeping gesture. 'I've shot him!'

'Good!' said Henry. 'Jolly good show!'

'Very big; at least twenty feet. Don't you think so, Pasupati?' Trevor asked his guide.

But Pasupati was taking no part in the conversation. He stood in silence behind Trevor, clutching the twelve-bore under his right arm.

'Is it . . . er, quite dead?' asked Jean.

'These things don't finish wriggling for several hours,' Henry told her.

'Chum's still rolling about like mad,' said Trevor. He was still standing beside his motor-cycle, and Henry and Jean had come to the edge of the verandah and were leaning against the wooden railing.

'Why on earth did you fire just one shot?' asked Henry. 'I told you it is just as well to give them a couple more—to make things doubly sure.'

'No use spoiling the skin, I thought. Head blown clean off Ask Pasupati.'

This time Pasupati agreed readily. 'Sahib number one shot,' he said. 'Kill fust shot. Agita moving like whip.'

'Good,' said Henry again. 'Now the coolies will have no further excuse to shirk work. Thank you, Trevor. Thanks for coming to tell me. We can let Herman loose again.'

'I was wondering if you wouldn't like to come and see him, sir,' said Trevor.

'See him? Lord, No! I've seen dozens. No, thank you; it's not a pretty sight.'

'Perhaps Mrs. Winton?' suggested Trevor. 'Mrs. Winton may not have seen a python in its natural surroundings.'

'Mrs. Winton does not like to see animals dying,' Henry told him.

'Oh, but I would, Henry,' said Jean. 'I would very much like to see the python. Can't we go?'

'Is it very far from the road?' asked Henry.

'Oh, quite far; at least a clear mile, perhaps more. It's right by a mule-path, though. The old triumph can go within a couple of hundred yards. Why don't you take Mrs. Winton on my motor-cycle, sir?' suggested Trevor. 'I could tell you where the exact spot is.'

'No, no; years since I've ridden one of those things. Bound to pile it up; after all that rain the day before yesterday. Mrs. Winton

will just have to wait till we can kill a python somewhere close to the main road.'

'It's a pity,' said Trevor. 'It really is enormous; and such wonderful colouring . . . Unless Mrs. Winton would not mind coming with me?'

'Not at all,' said Jean. 'I should love to. Can I go, Henry?'

'You won't like it, Jean. They thrash about for hours even after the head is severed. They can even be dangerous if you get too close. Besides, you don't like to see animals being killed, remember?'

'But I *would* like to see a python. It's not like seeing an animal killed right under your nose, and not being able to do anything about it. This is something quite different. May I go, Henry?'

'I'll drive very carefully, Mr. Winton,' Trevor promised.

'Well, if you really want to, Jean; but I assure you, you won't like it,' Henry said again.

'Thank you, darling,' said Jean.

'I shall bring Mrs. Winton back in fifteen minutes, sir, twenty at the most,' said Trevor, as he kicked the starter.

Henry had waited for three quarters of an hour before going off to his office, and they had still not returned by then. It was when he came back from the office for lunch that Jean told him more about the python.

'It was horrible, darling.'

'I knew it would be; I told you. Shall I ask the boy to make a gimlet for you?'

'Yes, please. I think I need one. Do you know, the Santhals were already gathering round with their horrible big knives.'

'They adore python meat. Here's your gimlet.'

'They were going to start cutting up as soon as I left, even when the thing was still quite alive.'

'It's not alive; it just happens to be wriggling.'

'Is there no way of finishing them off?'

'Dynamite perhaps, I don't know of anything else.'

'All because of a mating call. Instead of finding a mate, they get their heads blown off—it's horrible.'

'Well, if they would only keep away from tea-gardens, they wouldn't get their heads blown off. Was it very far?'

'What?—Oh, yes; we had to walk at least half-a-mile after the mule-path ended.'

'Big?'

'Enormous! And such a beautiful colour, Henry; shades of russet and brown and pale green— just like the trees and the earth, and so glossy. Eddie offered to give me the skin.'

'I thought he wanted the skin for Ruby ... his girl friend. I hope you said "no".'

'Of course. I don't care much for snakeskin shoes ... or handbags.'

'I'm glad you didn't take it. When he asked me for the gun, he told me he specially wanted to shoot the python so that he could present the skin to his ...'

'Wait, Henry. Do you know what Eddie told me?'

'Eddie'

'He said that when he asked to borrow your gun, that dreadful boy whom he took as his guide. ... You know what he told Eddie?'

'No,' Henry said. 'But please. ...'

'Well, he told him that if Winton sahib offered to give the big elephant gun to kill the python, he would not go with Eddie because the big gun is defective—it does not go off.'

'Oh, the damned liar!' Henry said in sudden anger. 'What absolute rot! The bloody little swine. ...'

'So I told Eddie that it was all wrong, of course, and that I was sitting right next to you when the big elephant gun was fired at the target, and that you shot so beautifully and all the shots went off; and Eddie too said that of course he and everyone else in the garden had heard all the shots.'

'Of course, there's nothing the matter with the four-sixty-five. I'll teach the little bastard to go about spreading rumours. ...'

'I told Eddie that you were the best shot in the world, because I know you are, darling, and also that you were the most, most particular man about your guns and your cartridges, and that anyone who says anything else wants his face slapped. I said that it was because you were so good and so reliable that the Government had come begging to you to finish off the one-tusked rogue, and I said that if the one-tusked rogue ever showed up again it would be you who would kill it.'

'Thank you, darling. I'll have that little swine Pasupati sacked at once. As it was, I only took him on as a favour, because ...'

'Oh, no, Henry; please, please,' Jean protested. 'I promised Eddie you wouldn't. Only then would he tell me. He's only a boy, really.'

and it seems he has taken his father's death terribly to heart.'

'Was Trevor telling you about that?'

'Yes; but he only said how wonderful you had been, and how some man called Jugal Kishore had been telling the boy all sorts of things. It isn't the boy's fault, really.'

'But I can't go on keeping Pasupati here. Well, perhaps I could have the twerp transferred. That's right. That's what I shall do. They want a gamekeeper at the Highlands Club. He should just suit that job. I'll get Sudden to take him on there; so that he stops spreading rumours about me, right in my own garden. In Chinnar, he will have no time for gossip because, in addition to being the gamekeeper, he will have to look after the game cottage. . . .'

'That's where I fell in love with you. Remember?'

'I fell in love with you before that, when I first saw you getting out of Sudden's car.'

'You are a liar, darling,' she said, brushing his cheek with her lips. 'But you're a very sweet liar, and I love you.'

Henry took her face in his hands and kissed her on the mouth.

24

Carried Unanimously

THE Chinnai Week of 1939 began with an afternoon conference. As soon as they were all assembled in the conference room, Sudden told them he had just heard that Cockburn had died.

There was a pin-drop silence in the room, and as though to honour the dead Sudden had gone on sitting with bowed head not saying anything, for a whole minute. Then he had given them some more details.

It seemed that Cockburn had not been ill for more than a couple of days, and just as the company's chief medical officer, Dr. Lewis, was about to leave for Lamlung, word had been received that he had died.

The first thought that came to Henry's mind was that Cockburn had died as he would have wished to die: his death had a kind of dramatic neatness about it. And then above the sense of personal sorrow, the curiously disloyal thought kept darting through his mind that, with Cockburn dead, no one but himself knew the circumstances of Kistulal's death. Was a sense of guilt always associated with some kind of evidence, with someone who knew the facts? Henry asked himself.

But Henry's chain of thought was broken abruptly.

'All the coolies at Lamlung have set aside two days' pay to build some kind of memorial to Cockburn,' Sudden was saying. 'I am offering them an equal sum from the company's funds.'

This must be the first time in Brindian history that the coolies on a garden had offered to set aside a part of their pay for a memorial to a manager, Henry reflected, and once again found himself wondering what it was that had made Cockburn so popular with the Indians.

'Dashed awkward,' Sudden was saying. 'Twenty-five men to run twenty-seven gardens now, and I'm afraid more will have to be going away soon. The Government won't agree to classify planters

as essential. Shocking ignorance, of course—sheer muddleheadedness!"

'So the decision has come, sir?' asked someone at the back.

'The decision, as you say, has come, together with an exhortation from the directors to make all possible efforts to increase production. Double it in three years. Who will double it? Where am I going to get the managers?'

Sudden glowered at them, as though expecting an answer, but no one said anything.

'What I propose to do is to send Cope-Liston to Lamlung and Marchbanks to Lower Tista.'

Marchbanks? The estates officer? asked Williamson.

'That's right. The Club will have to find its own man to look after its properties— or its own woman.'

Marchbanks was well past sixty. He had retired seven years ago, but since he had nowhere to go he had been found a job as the estates manager of the Highlands Club at five hundred rupees per month.

'The Club will damn well have to find someone to look after its properties,' Sudden ruled. It was rather an amusing situation since Sudden himself, in his capacity of President of the Highlands Club, would have to find a replacement for its estates officer.

Neither the war nor Cockburn's death made much difference to the spirit of the Chinnar Week. The committee was anxious to see that everything should go on as usual and as a result this year there seemed to be more people than ever, enjoying themselves with greater gusto. There were more cocktail parties, more beer-and-lunch sessions, more tea and tennis afternoons, and more picnics than ever before, and for the first time since its inception, the Week had to be extended to six days instead of the usual five. The war had brought on a new, somewhat reckless and defiant urge for escape and everything seemed to be a little more noisy and a little less inhibited. Indeed someone had even brought up a suggestion that the all-white rule might be relaxed to the extent of permitting the Club housekeeper to attend the annual rough shoot dance. But of course the committee had turned down the suggestion out of hand.

Because Henry had brought Herman with him and did not wish to keep the animal in the Club's kennels, he and Jean were staying in one of the tents. Jean, who had never lived in a tent before, was full of praise for its comfort.

'Your friend the housekeeper must be giving you special treatment,' she said to Henry, 'particularly now you're going to be a member of the Club committee.'

Henry laughed. 'Depends whether I get elected,' he answered modestly. But there was no question of his not being elected since it was Sudden himself who had put up his name.

However, within a couple of days, they had discovered that they were certainly not being singled out for preferential treatment; that it was merely indicative of the way things were running in the Club. Everyone who had come for the Week was full of praise for the new housekeeper, Miss Miranda. The food was better than ever, even though wartime shortages were already beginning to make themselves felt; there was more cleanliness all round, better service, and a general air of behind-the-scenes efficiency; all the furniture gleaming with polish, the cane chairs freshly painted, the brass shining, the drinks always cold, the tea and coffee always strong and hot, the linen crisp and snow-white. As a new member of the committee, Henry also came to know that despite the slight rise in prices due to the war, the catering profits had gone up substantially.

At the first meeting of the Club committee Henry attended, he had put up Pasupati's name for the job of gamekeeper, and had the satisfaction of having his first proposal carried unanimously.

It was then that Sudden came out with what he intended to do about filling Marchbanks' place. 'I think we should call upon the housekeeper to take on the responsibility for all Club estates, not just the clubhouse as at present.'

'You mean the golf hut and the boat house and all that?' asked Bradley, the vice-president.

'And the cricket pavilion, and the game cottage, the whole sub-cheeze,' declared Sudden.

'That would involve a round of inspection of about eight miles, sir,' Henry pointed out.

'Well, we all have to be prepared to shoulder extra burdens in wartime, gentlemen. I think we should tell the housekeeper that she has been placed in charge of the Club estates. In addition to her present duties, of course.'

'You weren't thinking of giving her Marchbanks' pay, were you, Sudden?' inquired Bradley.

'No. But we shall have to give her some kind of a conveyance. I

was thinking that we could buy Cockburn's Citroën and place it at the service of the housekeeper, and also pay her an allowance of, say, fifty rupees a month for running expenses.'

'Fifty chips should be quite enough,' said Bradley, nodding approval. 'Yes, quite enough. How much will the car cost, do you think, Sudden?'

'We shall have to value it ourselves. About three hundred rupees, I should say. Cockburn hardly used the thing, except to come here now and then. Used to keep it garaged in Lower Tista.'

'Does she does the housekeeper know how to drive a car, Sir Jeffrey?' asked one of the members.

'If she doesn't, she'll just have to learn,' snapped Sudden. 'Agreed gentlemen?'

And agreed it was.

It was on his third afternoon at Chinnar, as he was going through one of his chores as a committee member, that Henry Winton congratulated Ruby Miranda on the improvements she had made in the Club's catering. He was checking a list of articles which the housekeeper had recommended should be written off, and she was standing in front of the table, leaning across it and trying to read out some of the hand-written entries which Henry had not been able to decipher.

She looked severe and business-like and a little over eager, in a trim, dove-grey coat-and-skirt, and with her hair done up in a neat bun, and somehow she was wholly a part of her surroundings, the steel filing cabinets and the dark chairs and the musty smell of old records. Bending slightly forward, with a slightly anxious look on her face, she looked as though some clever artist had posed her for a portrait, knowing how she would look her best, getting the light just right, dressing her in the colours that flattered her figure and complexion.

Henry wanted to pull her head down and kiss her on the full, pouting mouth, to crush her into his arms. As it was, all he said was, 'Everyone is talking about how well you are running the Club.'

'Thank you,' said Ruby tonelessly.

'I'm sorry about the committee turning down the proposal to let you come to the rough shoot dance.'

'I don't think I would have come to the dance anyway,' answered

Ruby, 'unless it had been necessary in a purely professional capacity.'

There was not the least trace of bitterness in her tone, she might have been explaining some figures in the Club accounts. Ruby spoke with a new dignity, and Henry was again struck by the improvement in her accent and her choice of words.

'Besides,' Ruby said, 'my fiancé would not have liked the idea of my going to a dance with strangers.'

'Your fiancé?'

'Eddie has got a job now,' Ruby explained.

It was good to know that she was going to be married, and yet Henry was aware of a slight ripple of disappointment. He turned back to the Club registers. 'I really don't know how you are going to look after Marchbanks' work in addition to your own,' he said. 'Your present work is a full time job, I'm sure. I say, I do hope you can drive a car?'

'If I couldn't, I would just have to learn, wouldn't I?' said Ruby, still in a flat voice. That was what Sudden had remarked at the closed-door committee meeting, and Henry wondered how it could have reached Ruby's ears.

'But can you?'

'I can ride a motor cycle very well, and I've had a few lessons in driving a car. I shall be able to manage.'

'I'm really glad, if only for the Club's sake. There's bound to be an all-round improvement. Marchbanks did damn all, just sat and drank gin all day.'

'I shall do my best.'

'Any help I can give you . . . I'm on the committee now . . . You only have to ask.'

'Thank you. I'll keep that in mind. I might have to worry you some time about the game cottage. I wouldn't know what improvements were needed.'

'Oh, I'll give you my own ideas. I'm sure the game cottage could do with some renovating. We must . . . er, we must go and have a look at it some day. I say, you are looking lovely today. I mean lovelier than ever.'

'Thank you,' said Ruby, very formally.

'Eddie Trevor is a lucky man, damned lucky.'

'A good man too; very good and very true.'

'I do hope he gets his commission.'

'I don't care, so long as he doesn't get called up before exmas.'

She hadn't said 'oh, my!' once, thought Henry, or things like 'ta muchly' or 'great!', and now she had to go and call Christmas 'exmas'; o, Pygmalion!—how difficult, how heartbreaking it was to unlearn a way of speech! So much more difficult than learning an altogether new language.

'Were you thinking of going away for the Christmas holidays?' he asked.

'I've always spent exmas at home,' she said. 'And so has Eddie. He will be there too.'

'Are you going to be married during the Christmas holidays?'

'I don't know,' answered Ruby. 'All I know is that I don't want to go on being the housekeeper at this Club all my life.'

'I say,' Henry ventured, encouraged by her faint smile. 'I don't want to offend you: but I must congratulate you on the improvement in the way you speak.'

'I'm so glad you noticed,' said Ruby, her smile widening a little. 'I try very hard; repeat every sentence after the BBC announcers. And I also try and memorize the phrases I come across in conversation—the way the women here say things.'

'Oh, really?'

'Only, most of the women here don't speak like the BBC at all. Quite a few say things like "amaneggs" instead of "ham and eggs", and "wotcher think" and "rahnd abaht" and "rinyin" for "raining"; and Mrs. Atkins says "kum-bach" when she wants her little son to come back.'

'Oh, well; not all the women you see here are . . . are out of the top drawer, y'know,' Henry explained, wondering for a moment if she were being sarcastic; but he noticed that she was still smiling. He covered her hand with his, and asked:

'Am I forgiven for losing my temper that time?'

Ruby did not draw away her hand. 'There's nothing to forgive; it was all my fault,' she said.

'No, no, mine entirely. . . . Anyway, are we—well, we're still friends?'

'Of course,' Ruby assured him. 'Of course we are friends.'

He gave her hand a squeeze and they looked into each other's eyes and smiled. 'Just friends?—no more?' he whispered, still looking directly into her eyes.

Ruby blushed and looked away, but she did not draw away her

hand. Then she said something which surprised him, 'It all depends on you, Mr. Winton.'

This time the Brindian team did win the team shoot; but once again it was Peter Bliss who won the rough shoot championship. Henry was runner-up—just seven birds short of Bliss. Even Sudden must have felt that he would have fared better and almost certainly topped Bliss's score if he had been given the choice of butts. Sudden had invited the Brindian four to his house for a quick drink before the rough shoot dance. Just as they were about to leave his place to go and get dressed, he said, 'Hang on a minute, Henry. I want a word with you,' and the others had taken the hint and hurried away.

'I feel that if you had been shooting on the forward butt on the hogsback instead of myself,' said Sudden, 'you would have caught up with Peter.'

'I don't know, sir,' said Henry. 'I didn't do so badly on the hogsback.'

'Well, sorry. Next year you can choose your butts.'

'It really does not make any difference, Sir Jeffrey,' Henry assured him.

'It should make a difference,' Sudden protested somewhat belligerently. 'You should want to win the rough shoot, dammit everyone should!'

'I shall certainly keep trying.'

'Look, Henry,' said Sudden with a slightly anxious look. 'I've been thinking about keeping people's jobs open. I mean, those who join up even when they don't have to.'

'I think it would be only fair, sir.'

'Mind you, I'm not prepared to make a general rule of it; but I'm certainly willing to consider every case on its merits. Now, what you have told me about this chap of yours, Trevor. Rather touching, what?'

'It certainly is.'

'I mean, there's this chap who need not join up at all, turning down a manager's job just because he wants to go and fight the Hun; just because the Empire is at war—extraordinary!'

'He has certainly shown a lot of . . . lot of guts, sir.'

'I should say so—lot of guts. And I do admire that more than anything else, Henry—guts. I have sent a personal letter to General

Maclean asking him to see what he can do about getting Trevor a commission. Dammit! All sorts of people are being given the King's commission, these days. Trevor deserves to get in, if anyone does.'

'He certainly does.'

'And I'm determined to keep his job open, with a recommendation that he should be promoted to manager as soon as he is able to report back. What do you think?'

'It is certainly generous of you, sir.'

'Well, you can tell him so, Henry, when you get back—wait. I think I would like to tell him myself. Look, I'm thinking of coming round to inspect Silent Hill next week. I would like to tell Trevor myself; y'know, sort of timely pat on the back means a hell of a lot, what?'

'It certainly does.'

'I mean, no use treating these chaps as complete outsiders when they are showing so much so much spirit, what?' and Sudden had smiled a tight lipped smile

'Of course sir Trevor will appreciate it, I'm sure'

I'm glad you agree. Let's see now I could come next Saturday, just for the day. Return here on Sunday. That all right?'

'Certainly sir'

'Good! I'll turn up on Saturday, then, let's see, that will be the 25th, that's right I'll be there about eleven'

Henry remembered to ask, 'Will Lady Dart be accompanying you?'

'What's that?' Sudden snapped. 'Of course not, not for an inspection. I never take Kitty with me when I go out on an inspection. You should know that, Henry'

'I'm sorry, sir,' said Henry.

25

'Living in the Sunlight'

HENRY ate his breakfast in silence, first glancing through the day-old *Calcutta Statesman*, and then a four-weeks-old *Times*, stacking the pages neatly on the table kept by his side; going through porridge and cream, eggs and bacon and fried halved 'omatoes, buttered toast, marmalade, two slices of papaya, three cups of tea.

'Can't we get English marmalade any more?' he asked his wife.

Jean had just come into the verandah, carrying an armful of dahlias she had plucked from the garden. 'Marmalade? Oh! Not in the Tinapur shops, and the Club won't give us more than a jar a month. You'll just have to make do with Indian-made marmalade.'

Filling his first pipe of the day, Henry looked at his wife as she sat in the window, bending over the red and pink and yellow flowers as though posed for a colour photograph. She wore a yellow, loose-fitting cardigan and a grey skirt, and a flowered heavily mud-spattered apron. She looked more appealing than ever, Henry thought with a curious detachment, more beautiful than when he had first seen her on Sudden's lawn.

For Henry Winton, it was a matter of intense, personal pride that his wife should be so beautiful, with just the necessary irregularity in her features to lift her face above the merely handsome; finely chiselled, well bred, so wholly and unmistakably English, like English lavender, this woman he had brought back from his home leave, having caught her on the rebound when she had found that the man she had loved and considered herself engaged to was no longer in love with her. She had accepted him then, without any reservations, almost overwhelming him with the rush of her emotions, headlong and totally unrestrained, as though making up for denying her love to him in the beginning.

And he had brought her in triumph, from a prim, Cheltenham lawn to the wild hills of upper Assam; all the way to his plantation bungalow perched high up in the skies, remote and inaccessible,

like an eagle carrying away his kill to his lair, out of reach of other birds, cleaning up the place for her, making it worthy of receiving her by getting rid of Ruby Miranda.

As he looked fondly at his wife, bending over the flowers, Henry caught himself wondering how Ruby Miranda would have looked wearing those clothes, the loose yellow cardigan and the plain grey skirt with the mud-stained apron. Ruby would never have worn clothes like that, he told himself; he could never visualize Ruby in casual, loose-fitting clothes. Ruby had to have her dresses skin tight, always bright and satiny. . . .

Jean glanced up from the flowers and happened to catch his gaze. She peered inquiringly at him, and he started and turned his eyes away guiltily as though she had fathomed his innermost thoughts.

'Are you sure Eddie's got a dinner jacket?' Jean was asking. 'It would have been so much simpler to ask him to come in a lounge suit.'

'Sudden wouldn't have approved. Anyway, I know Trevor has got a dee-jay. I've seen him wearing it. But I can't get used to the idea of your referring to the man as Eddie.'

Jean laughed. 'I couldn't very well go for a ride on his motorcycle over your dizzy mule-tracks and still go on mistering him, could I? Besides, I've always called him Eddie. You seem to forget we were on the same boat going home.'

'And I wish he hadn't sent the trout.'

'But darling . . . ! I nearly jumped with joy when his boy turned up with those trout. We'll be able to give Sudden such a wonderful dinner; both trout and pheasant' Otherwise it might have had to be tinned salmon. . . . What do you think?' She was holding up the large cut-glass bowl now filled with dahlias. 'For the spare-room.'

'Sudden loves flowers; the bigger and the more violently coloured the better. . . . I wonder how he ever got married to anyone as colourless as Lady D. Have we got enough soda?

'A dozen bottles. Enough?'

'Rather. We're having wine with dinner.'

'Why isn't Sir Jeffrey bringing Kitty with him?'

'He never takes her out on an inspection.'

'Just as well he isn't bringing her. One of them would have had to sleep on the camp-bed. Whatever did you do, Henry, when you had some husband and wife staying with you?'

'I never had a couple visiting me, thank God. Only Sudden comes up for his inspections, every six months or so. Occasionally, another planter. . . .'

'No one else?'

Henry gave her a sharp look. What was she trying to find out? Had the servants been saying things to her?

'No.'

'The room certainly needed dusting. I have just been having it turned out for Sir Jeffrey's visit.'

'Marvellous dinner!' pronounced Sudden, splashing tabasco sauce on the mushroom savoury. 'Wonderful wife you've got, Henry. Where on earth did you get the trout?'

'Trevor sent the trout, Sir Jeffrey,' said Henry. 'We have to thank him for the trout.'

'Thank you,' said Sudden to Trevor, bowing his head slightly.

'Went fishing yesterday,' said Trevor, smiling shyly. 'I was lucky. . . .'

'You must let me into the secret one of these days,' said Sudden. 'When I go fishing, they never seem to look at a fly.'

'Eddie shot an enormous python the other day,' put in Jean.

'Did you now? How enormous?' asked Sudden.

'Nineteen-feet-six, sir,' Trevor told him.

'Mmmm, that's big, jolly big; must have taken a lot of killing.'

'Just one shot,' said Eddie proudly, 'one shot in the head.'

'Hummm; and what sort of a gun have you got?'

'I have no gun, sir. Mr. Winton very kindly lent me his Manton.'

'The hammer one?'

'Yes, sir; got a very good choke on it,' said Eddie.

'Oh, that ancient thing! How could you, Henry? The thing may blow up any day. Why don't you get a proper gun,' Sudden asked Trevor, 'if you're really keen on shooting? Are you keen on shooting?'

'Very keen, sir.'

'Look,' said Sudden. 'I'll leave one of my twelve-bores here, so that you can put in a spot of shooting here before you . . . before you get called up.'

'You mean one of . . . one of the Purdy pair?' asked Henry, taken aback. Was Sudden really offering one of his beloved Purdy's to Trevor, absolutely priceless guns now that there was a war

on...? Sudden who normally would never trust anyone else to handle his guns?

'Yes, one of the pair. I have no other shotguns.'

'Oh, Sir Jeffrey! . . . I really couldn't,' began Eddie. 'I mean . . .'

'Why not? Of course you can,' said Sudden a little tartly.

'Now don't go saying "I really couldn't", Eddie,' Jean admonished him playfully. 'Say thank you to the nice gentleman.'

'You just be careful, that's all,' said Sudden.

'Oh, I'll be careful, extremely careful, sir; nurse it like a baby. . . .'

'I didn't mean the gun, dammit!' Sudden said. 'I mean you'd better not go about taking fool chances with pythons and things like that. Pythons take a lot of killing, as Henry here will tell you.'

'I'll be very careful, sir,' Trevor promised, 'very careful.'

Sudden Dart was in a really expansive mood that evening. Henry had never seen him so relaxed and happy before. When Jean had left the table after dinner, he told Eddie Trevor how he was going to hold his job for him, and to try and see that he got a managership after the war.

'Much easier to lay that on tickety-boo for Lieutenant or Captain Trevor than just plain Mister Trevor, what?' And then Sudden had come out with it, 'Oh, yes, you'll get your commission, all right. They'll have to find enough officers for an army of a million men in India. General Maclean has assured me that he will be doing his best, and if Jock Maclean can't get his way in GHQ, well, no one else can. He's tipped to be the next army commander, y'know.' And with that, Sudden raised his glass and added, 'Here's luck, Eddie!'

Henry joined in the toast, but he felt a mounting sense of irritation. Without seeming to try, Eddie Trevor was stealing all the warmth of Sudden's new-found expansiveness. 'Shall we go and join the lady, sir?' he suggested.

'Certainly,' said Sudden, rising with alacrity, 'certainly.'

They went into the big sitting-room with the rustic, rubble-work fire-place and Henry's major hunting trophies on the walls and the tiger rug on the floor. The number one houseboy brought in a tray of sparkling liqueur glasses and a bottle of Drambuie. Henry was glad to see that Jean was having a drink for he had thought she had been looking a little tense and tired all through the evening, as though she had been overdoing things. As a rule Jean neither drank

nor smoked, but to-day she had already had two glasses of Sauterne with dinner, and now she was having a liqueur.

Henry leaned over her and patted her shoulder. 'Tired?' he whispered.

'Just a little,' she said.

Eddie Trevor refused a glass of Drambuie, as he had refused all drinks before and during dinner. He was dressed in a black alpaca dinner jacket which seemed to bring out the spareness of the tall, athletic figure, accentuate the slimness of the hips; and the subdued lighting in the room made his somewhat sharply etched features and his deep-set black eyes look less un-English and even, Henry admitted with reluctance, handsome in a theatrical way.

'Try a cigar, Eddie,' said Sudden, offering him his pigskin gold-edged case.

'No, thank you,' said Eddie politely. 'I've got to nurse my wind, for hockey. All I smoke is this,' and Trevor held out a green and white packet of Kool cigarettes.

'Don't those affect your wind?' asked Henry.

'I never smoke more than four cigarettes a day, five at the most, that is my rule,' Trevor explained. 'But even that is bad enough. Dhyen Chand would throw a fit if he were to find out that I smoke. Anyway, I cut it out completely while in training. No smoking or drinking, so long as one wants to play hockey.'

'American, are they?' asked Jean.

'Yes, cork-tipped and menthol-cooled. Would you like to try one?'

'No, thank you. I don't mind a drink, now and then, but I don't think I could ever learn to smoke.'

'No smoking, no drinking, grim, isn't it?' said Sudden with a hearty laugh. 'Wouldn't do for us, what, Henry? Thank god we're long past the age of training for hockey.'

The radio was playing soft, light music. Eddie Trevor rose to his feet, walked across to Jean's chair and asked, 'Would you like to dance?'

'Certainly,' said Jean, smiling at him and rising

They danced very well, both not moving about too much and doing nothing intricate—at least it didn't seem intricate when they did it; and they looked well dancing together, both tall and straight and slim; his clothes jet black, hers all white, his head jet black, hers pure gold and coming well above his shoulders. Henry did not like to look at them, and yet he wanted to go on looking at them

because they were dancing so well, and because of their rapt expressions, the look of extreme contentment on their faces as though they were alone together, dancing in a deserted house. Like all good dancers, they seemed to have forgotten the world round them. Jean's face no longer looked tense and tired; it had a new radiance.

'What do you think is going to happen to the war?' Sudden was asking.

'The war?' said Henry. 'Things are bound to flare up sooner or later.' The war was very far away from his thoughts.

'What can the Germans do against the Maginot Line? My God! - the Maginot Line. *They shall not pass!* Pétain said in the last war, and by God they did not pass. This time it's the Maginot Line that will hold them. *Ils ne passeront pas! They shall not pass!* What do you think of the French?'

Henry wasn't thinking about the French. He was waiting for the music to be over, for Jean and Trevor to finish their dance. It was here that Ruby and he had danced, all those months ago, and somehow Jean was looking exactly as Ruby had looked that day, submissive, eager to please, ready to surrender. He shook off the thoughts rising within him.

'The French?' said Henry. 'The French have a wonderful army, of course; the best in the world, they say. And they have the Maginot line.'

'Not the best in the world,' said Sudden. 'The British army is the best in the world.'

The music seemed to come slightly louder now. A throaty male voice was repeating with nauseating insistence:

Darling how can I prove to you
How I long for you, ache for you.

'Are you ready for a drink, sir?' Henry asked Sudden.

'Yes thank you. I should like a whisky and-water.'

'Boy!' called Henry. 'Boy!'

The tune came to an end, but Jean and Trevor stood just where they were, in the middle of the floor, near the open-mouthed-tiger rug, still holding each other's hands and waiting with expectant half-smiles on their faces; and when the music came on again, their smiles broke out and they continued to dance. It was a tune called *Living in the Sunlight*, a much faster kind of tune, but they did not seem to be dancing any faster. It was smooth and effortless and

polished. And they were perfectly matched, for size and shape and colour; they danced like professionals—except that they did not have the hard, set faces of professional dancers. They seemed to be enjoying dancing with each other.

Like lovers almost, thought Henry.

Just how friendly had they been on that ship three years ago, he wondered, with the endless opportunities and temptations of ship-board travel? They must have seen quite a lot of each other to have won a competition together. Had they been lovers?

There was an insult in the implication, and Henry's mind recoiled from it. But the thought had gone flashing through his mind and left a soreness and, as he watched them dancing, Henry found a bitterness rising within him. He wanted to get up and hit Trevor, throw him out of his house. He looked at Sudden, seeking some evidence of disapproval. Sudden had closed his eyes and slumped down in his chair, and Sudden was humming, in a croaky gurgling voice, but he was keeping in tune with the music and nodding his head gently from side to side to its beat.

'The boy has brought your drink, Sir Jeffrey,' remarked Henry.

'Leave it on the table, boy,' said Sudden without even opening his eyes.

They had their first row later that night. He was already in bed, with an issue of the *Strand* magazine in his hands; but he was not reading, and there was a throbbing pain at the back of his neck. Jean was still pottering round, dressed in her quilted house-coat; she always seemed to find a dozen things to do just before getting into bed.

'I don't know what Sudden must be thinking,' said Henry, 'about your calling Trevor "Eddie".'

'Why should he think anything? Besides, Sudden too calls him Eddie,' said Jean, laughing.

'I'd much rather you had said "no" when he asked you to dance.'

'But I enjoyed it, darling. And it was such a relief not to have to listen to the interminable talk of tea and shooting. And he dances like a professional; not that I have ever danced with a professional.' She was still laughing, as though at a private joke.

'It's hardly a laughing matter,' said Henry, resenting her good humour. 'It is not considered well-bred to be too familiar with the Eurasians.'

'Not considered well-bred by whom?' asked Jean in a voice that had gone suddenly sharp, and Henry knew that he had succeeded in making her angry.

'Well, by the sahibs.'

'And yet Sir Jeffrey treats Eddie like a favourite son. I don't think he'd have let anyone else handle his Purdy, not even you.'

She was quite ignorant about guns, and yet it was extraordinary how much she knew about a man's attachment to his favourite guns.

'Sudden's got his own fads. But I do wish you would have some consideration for my feelings in the matter.'

'Your feelings?'

'Yes.'

'On the question of mixing with Anglo-Indians?'

'Yes.'

'You don't like them?'

'It's not a question of liking or disliking them. It is just that they are different from us, the ruling race.'

'What about the housekeeper at the Club? What about Ruby Miranda?'

Henry turned on her as though she had slapped his face. 'What about her? You don't know what you're talking about.'

'I know exactly what I'm talking about,' said Jean. 'Do you think I am blind and deaf? Do you think the women at Chinnar let me forget that she was your mistress here?—that you even wanted to marry her?—that you found a job for her where you could go on seeing her even after we were married. . . .'

'It's a lie!—bloody women's gossip! And that was all long before we were married?'

'You mean it's no business of mine what happened before we were married?'

'I mean exactly that. You cannot go digging up things that happened when I was a bachelor. And what about your affair with Tony Barwell, whom you were going to marry. . . . Yes, what about him?'

'Please don't bring his name into this,' said Jean in a chilling voice. 'You don't know him, you know nothing about him. You would have gone on knowing nothing if I had not told you myself. It was I who told you I was in love with him—that I was going to marry him. I did not keep it all a dark secret. . . .'

'At least I didn't want to marry Ruby Miranda. . . .'

'That's not because you did not love her, but because she happens to have a touch of colour and you, of course, were the pucca, all-white sahib, afraid of being contaminated. You were also frightened of the consequences . . . Your career. . . .'

'You had no business to go prying into my past, believing women's bitchy gossip!'

'But I didn't have to go looking, and it was not all gossip either. Do you know what I found this morning, when I was settling the guest-room? A pair of silk stockings tucked under the mattress. I know they are her stockings. No one has to tell me that; a woman always knows. What do you think the servants thought when they saw the stockings? They knew all about it. I know you fitted out the room for her, dismissed the old house boy. I know you gave her the perfume and she smashed it on the floor. . . .'

'Stop!' Henry almost shouted. 'Stop it!'

'And I know something else,' Jean went on. 'I know that you are still infatuated with her, deep within yourself. I can feel it; I can feel it every time you look at me, every time you hold me in your arms, every time you make love to me— you are always comparing, always wondering to yourself whether you have made the right decision. You have never given me your whole-hearted love, Henry, although you have demanded it from me. You have always held back—and that a woman can never forgive.'

26

A Man and His Dog

S U D D E N left early the next morning, and as soon as his car had gone out of the drive Henry picked up his shotgun and game-belt, whistled to Herman, and went off for a walk.

He had slept badly, and the headache which had begun the previous night was still with him. He felt dazed and miserable. It seemed that, clever jungle man though he was, he had not been able to cover his tracks. He could not help doubting if he would ever be able to live down what his wife had come to know about Ruby Miranda and himself. She seemed to know everything and suspect much more, the tattling women of Chinnar had seen to that—that and her finding those stockings, the damned, flesh pink stockings he had bought for Ruby Miranda for Christmas, and which she seemed to have tucked away under the spare room mattress the only time she had occupied the room. He felt hot with shame every time he thought of Jean's coming across those stockings, and then coming and asking him if any married couple had occupied the spare-room at any time—just like a schoolboy being caught out in a barefaced lie!

He wanted time to think, and decided to go up Wallach's Folly and lie down on the grass. Wallach's Folly had suddenly assumed a new significance in his relationship with Jean. On the very first night of her arrival, he had promised to take her to Wallach's Folly within a day or two, but for one reason or another he had still not been able to do so, the little toy peak was still his, the highest point in his domain, the highest point within a score of miles.

At first the slope was gradual, almost imperceptible. Then the path climbed steeply through the dark, overhanging forest until you came to the sheer rock formation close to the top. The last bit was almost vertical, so like a man made wall, no more than twenty feet high at any point but virtually unclimbable unless you were a trained mountaineer. That was where Wallach had put a dozen thick wooden slats into niches cut into the rock-face to provide a

kind of open staircase running diagonally along the wall. Because of the stairs, Wallach's Folly was now quite easy to climb; there was no danger of missing any of those steps even at night.

Henry went up the steps almost at a run, because he had made it a private rule to go running up all the staircases he came to, and when he reached the top he was pleased with himself because he did not feel the least bit winded.

At the top, there was an almost level patch of ground no bigger than a tennis court, covered with thick, moist grass. It was completely cut off from the world below, with the tall coniferous trees growing on the slope providing a dense screen all round. From the top you could look down at the hills on all sides, through tiny and ever-changing peep-holes in the shifting foliage, but no one could see you; once you were on the top you were cut off from view as effectively as when you were behind the locked doors of the gun-room, invisible, in an intimate little patch of heaven all your own, seven thousand odd feet high, with the blue sky for your roof and the chir and deodar trees for your walls.

Henry lay back on the springy grass thinking about himself and Jean and Eddie Trevor and Ruby Miranda, trying to arrive at a sensible readjustment of values; trying, above all, to put himself in Jean's position, the position of a bewildered and newly married girl fresh from England being subjected to the coffee-time gossip of expatriate Englishwomen.

Henry's thoughts were cut off by the loud barking of his dog.

'Ooof-ooof, ooof-ooof, ooof-ooof!' Herman was complaining from the foot of the stairs.

Henry began to laugh, feeling a little surprised at himself for laughing at anything so frivolous, for Herman was barking because it could not climb the stairs. He got up and went to the edge of the hill and spoke soothingly to Herman. 'Good dog! Sit down Herman, sit! Good dog!'

Herman obediently sat on its haunches, fat and black and shining with health, but it went on barking. It had always been nervous when confronted with staircases, and once when Henry had taken the animal to the Tinapur railway station, he had had to carry it over the steel overbridge between the two platforms. The slats fitted into the rock-face of Wallach's Folly one above another were clearly far beyond Herman.

There was no ignoring the dog which went on barking, insistent

and complaining, but not in the least angry-sounding, and in the end it won. Henry had to climb down and subject himself to Herman's wildly affectionate greeting. That was one thing about a dog, Henry found himself thinking; they didn't give a damn about your past, you didn't have to go on your knees, begging for forgiveness every time you were found out.

He decided to indulge Herman. It was a long time since they had gone out hunting together. They set out on their favourite round, all about the Silent Hill estate, keeping close to the forest department fire-line and making a circle of close on eight miles. They managed to flush eleven pheasants, and Henry, who never shot more than three birds at a time except in competitive shooting, killed every single one of them with clean shots. Herman too had been in its element that day, sticking to Henry's heels all the time like a newly trained hunting dog, and it had brought back every bird Henry had shot, making some really spectacular retrieves. It was a wonderful, heart-warming relationship . . . a good shotgun hunter and his gun-dog.

By the time they turned back, Henry had begun to feel much less tense, and when he came within sight of his bungalow, still nearly half-a-mile distant, he had to restrain an impulse to yell a 'coo-eee' to announce his return.

The sharp morning air had cleared the fuzziness of his head. He could now think clearly, and the more he thought about the previous evening the more he realized how churlish he had been. It was the number of drinks, of course; he always seemed to drink far too much whenever Sudden Dart was round. The drinks, and possibly the ridiculous thought planted in his mind by something Cockburn had said about women finding a man like Trevor irresistible. He could see that the fault was all on his side, and the only thing for him to do was to seek his wife's forgiveness. It was quite childish to have objected to her somewhat easy familiarity with Trevor; you could not really blame a sheltered girl like Jean who had spent most of her life in England for not appreciating the fact that suburban English civilities were wholly out of place in the wilds of Assam. Eddie could not possibly have meant anything to her; and Henry had felt a stab of humiliation at having given her the impression that he could be jealous of a man like Eddie Trevor.

Of course it was not jealousy, it could not be; for he could not imagine himself being jealous of anyone so far beneath himself in

his private scale of values. Nor was there the slightest cause for jealousy. Apart from anything else, everyone knew that Trevor was madly in love with Ruby Miranda, and within a few weeks they were going to Tinapur for the Christmas holidays where their engagement was going to be announced. And after that Trevor was going to join the officers' training school at Belgaum, or wherever it was—and go out of his life, and out of Jean's, for ever. Henry felt a strange sense of freedom, as though he had exorcized his fears and anxieties by analysing his own mind.

Just as he came on to the main road, he heard in the distance the angry roar of a motor-cycle exhaust and looked up to see Trevor's blood-red Triumph come hurtling down the drive of his bungalow, leaving behind a clear white trail of dust in its wake.

So Eddie Trevor had already taken away Sudden's Purdy. He might have expected that he would turn up for the gun some time this morning, and Henry for one could not have brought himself to blame him for it. Oddly enough, he did not feel the least bit resentful that Trevor had gone to his bungalow when he was not there. As he turned into the drive, he felt completely at peace with himself.

He walked into the bungalow with a light step, proudly holding up the game-belt heavy with the eleven pheasants dangling by their necks. He left the birds on the verandah and told the number one boy to put them all in a row and to look after them until he had inspected them and entered them in his game book. Then he went into the gun-room to put away his shotgun.

The gun-room still smelt heavily of perfume, and it was dark because of the narrow, heavily draped windows placed somewhat high on the walls. The first thing Henry noticed was a tray with empty cups and a cake plate piled with biscuits. So Jean had invited Trevor in for a cup of coffee. He made up his mind not to say anything to her about her having asked Trevor to come in; he did not want to give her the impression that he was still capable of suspecting anything so absurdly ridiculous as a more than casual relationship between a girl like Jean and a man like Eddie Trevor.

Henry took his time over cleaning his Holland, first with paper balls and then with bits of rag soaked in three-in-one oil, and put the cleaning things neatly on a spread-out newspaper. It was after he had put away the gun in the rack and bent down to drop the bundle of paper and rags into the waste-basket under his table that

he noticed the two conspicuous cotton-filled cigarette butts lying at the bottom of the freshly cleaned-out basket.

For a moment, Henry wondered that the boy should have emptied the ash-tray into the waste basket when he hadn't had time to remove the coffee-things. And then it occurred to him that Eddie Trevor had said that he never smoked more than four or five cigarettes a day. He must have been there quite a while to have smoked two cigarettes, reflected Henry.

Even in his present mood of easy tolerance, Henry could not help wishing that Jean had offered Trevor coffee on the verandah or in the sitting-room, and not in the gun-room, the only room in the bungalow where you could have all the privacy you wanted by merely closing a door.

A mean, ugly suspicion kept darting through his brain, a thought so revolting that he was angry with himself for allowing it to enter his mind. There was nothing more contemptible than a husband who could not trust his wife, he told himself. There was bound to be a perfectly simple explanation, and he applied his mind to finding it out. She had asked him into the gun-room because that was where Sudden's gun had been kept. That was the answer, the transparent answer, and his suspicion was no doubt prompted by his own background of guilt, for it was in the gun-room that he himself had been in the habit of receiving Ruby Miranda.

Armed with that oddly comforting explanation, Henry went into the bedroom, determined to make it up with his wife. She was sitting on her cushioned dressing-table stool which she had dragged close to the open window and she was knitting a heather-coloured, heavy-ribbed pullover sweater which he knew was intended as a Christmas present for himself. She must have heard him enter the room, but she neither turned her head nor said anything. As he went up to her, Henry was touched by the thought that she should be knitting a sweater for him even though she did not seem to have forgiven him.

He put his arms round her from the back and bent down and brushed her neck with his lips. 'I want to say I am sorry,' he said.

'Your lips are cold,' she complained, drawing herself away.

'Please don't punish me any more, darling. I am telling you how sorry I am; I realize how stupid, now; and I don't know what could have come over me. It must have been all those drinks. I always seem to drink too much when I am with Sudden.'

'Eddie came and took his gun away,' said Jean.

'I saw him leaving,' answered Henry.

'I was having a cup of coffee, so I asked him to join me.' She still seemed hurt and wholly unresponsive, and her voice was subdued, almost toneless.

'Darling, I realize how utterly absurd and ridiculous I must have sounded last night. It was the whisky of course, and the wine. How I could ever have thought you could have the least interest in a man like Eddie Trevor, I cannot imagine. It was preposterous even to have suggested that you enjoyed his company. I can only say I am sorry.'

'Sometimes,' said Jean in a very low, dry voice, 'sometimes, you make things far more difficult than they need be. Because you are so unbelievably naïve yourself, you can never put yourself in the place of someone who is not as uncomplicated as you are.'

But Henry was not listening to her words, for he had detected a slight response to his caress, as though Jean had leaned towards him, and almost in spite of himself the words had come flooding out of him in a wave of gratefulness, 'I may be stupid and naïve, but I love you, and all that I know is that I'm crazy about you, darling . . . darling!'

He went on pressing his face into the soft yellow wool of her cardigan and drawing her closer and closer to him, his hands cupping her breasts tightly.

'I'm ashamed about everything that happened last night,' he murmured. 'And I love you; oh, I love you so much that it hurts. Darling, your back smells lovely. . . .'

He felt his whole body stiffen, repelling her contact with its every fibre, as though he were embracing something unclean and contaminated, and a horrible thought went searing through his brain as his own words came mocking back at him: 'Darling, your back smells lovely!'

He checked himself just in time—on the brink of the gaping bottomless precipice.

Like a monstrous, nightmarish jig-saw puzzle, the pieces came falling into an increasingly more coherent pattern and forming themselves into a wholly unbelievable picture; cruel and shocking and ugly. The odd details, factual and inescapable, kept stabbing at the walls of his mind with spiteful insistence: the inviolable, easy privacy of the gun-room, the two Kool cigarette butts neatly

deposited in the waste-basket, the heavy perfume from the carpet clinging to her cardigan as though she had been lying on the carpet. . . .

Henry could not bear the thoughts that came flooding into his mind. He released his embrace and fled from the room. It was to the darkness of the gun-room that he went, as though escaping from light; he felt dizzy and slightly sick. For a moment, he felt that his head was going to burst and he pressed it tightly with both hands. When he opened his eyes he found that he was staring into the thick brown pile of the carpet exactly at the spot where the Chanel bottle had broken.

Henry poured himself a stiff brandy and gulped it down. As the raw spirit went coursing down his throat, it seemed to have an almost instantaneous steadying effect. One could not begin to suspect one's wife of unfaithfulness merely because one had found a couple of cigarette ends or because her clothes smelt of perfume that had soaked into a carpet. That would have brought the whole structure of their life crashing down. It was important to discipline one's thoughts, important not to go jumping to ready-made conclusions possibly prompted by one's own background of guilt. There was nothing more pathetic, nothing more despicable than a husband eaten up with jealousy, Henry told himself again, particularly when he did not himself have too clean a record.

He poured himself another stiff drink from the Martell bottle and laughed at himself as he drank; laughed and toasted himself, knowing that he had just saved something of great value: that his new discipline had pulled him back just in time from the gates of darkness, just when he was on the verge of overshooting the point of no return.

27

They came bearing Gifts

FOR Henry Winton, the three weeks before Christmas were a challenge, weeks of a taut, touch-and-go striving to achieve normality after a near breakdown—something like a person suspected of madness trying to establish his sanity. He was determined to say or do nothing that might give his wife the slightest cause to think that he had been on the brink of accusing her of infidelity, and also to make a sincere effort to rid his mind of the insulting suspicions he had entertained about her.

But even more than the pressure of his own determination, what kept him going during those crucial days of readjustment was the comforting, ever-present thought that when the Christmas holidays came, Eddie Trevor would be going off to Tinapur, and that before he returned his engagement to Ruby Miranda would be announced.

Only three weeks more, three weeks of this tight-rope existence, Henry kept reminding himself. After that everything would be just as it had been. In the meantime there was work; hard, concentrated work—a man's antidote to all emotional upheavals.

Sudden had been flooding his managers with new directives, driving them to greater efforts to produce more and more tea, and Henry had found that he had to leave Jean more and more to herself. He often felt sorry for her, being cooped up in the bungalow for hours on end with nothing to do but look at the view and knit or read. He had suggested to her that she should go out for walks in the afternoon.

'You are still looking a little off colour,' he said to her. 'A spot of exercise in the fresh air would do you a world of good.'

'But I shall never feel safe in the jungle all by myself,' she said.

'But you don't have to go by yourself. You can take Herman. And there's no danger, really, so long as you don't go off the foot-paths.'

'What about pythons?'

effort to fall in line with his inclinations, to avoid points of difference at all cost.

The placid indifference, the anxiety to meet him at least half way in everything, had become a feature of her whole attitude towards him. She never repelled him, but she no longer seemed capable of responding to his ardour with the same wild sensuousness of the first, rapturous days of their being together. She would lie cold and inert in his arms, striving to create a façade, trying desperately to say and do all the appropriate things, as though she were playing a complicated game and were determined to observe all the rules even though she was not enjoying playing it. She made a shameful mockery of his wild longing for her, his passion, a thing of animal lust. He could not rid himself of the feeling that it was vaguely like rape. And yet he could not leave her alone, for he was weak and he loved her with a new fierceness, as though to prove his superiority to other men she might have known and loved, with a constant, flaming desire his body crying out for physical contact with hers.

But during the week they were brought closer together, if only for the reason that they had to thrust aside their private fears and longings, and become united by a shared anxiety. They had sat hand in hand, glued to the wireless and tensely following a grim, long drawn out battle that was being fought at the other end of the world. And when, on 18 December, the news came, that the *Graf Spee* had scuttled herself Jean gave a whoop of joy and flung her arms round him. And that spontaneous gesture made Henry realize with a startling suddenness how much more the war seemed to mean to her than it did to him. For Henry Winton, his wife's joyous outburst at the sinking of the *Graf Spee* came as something of a revelation. It brought the war nearer, into sharper focus, its phoniness suddenly became less phony. The Royal Navy had won its first notable victory of the war, while he, Henry Winton, was still waiting for his call up in the quiet placidity of an Assam tea-garden, getting worked up about not being able to buy English pipe tobacco and English marmalade.

'I've half a mind to write and tell Sudden I'm fed up with waiting,' he said to Jean that morning. 'Tell him I'd like to be released in time to join the first officers' course in 1940.'

'Do you think Sudden would play up?' asked Jean without much enthusiasm.

'I don't care what Sudden thinks. He's damn well got to hold our jobs here, according to the Government ruling. It's just a question of getting away without waiting to be called up.'

'You're doing just as much for the war, producing tea here, as you would be acting as supply officer at some headquarters or something like that.'

'I quite see that, of course. Only . . . well, it feels so degrading to be stuck out here when they are fighting out battles like that of the River Plate . . . and . . . and when chaps like Eddie Trevor are joining up. What do you think?'

'Darling, it's rather unfair to ask me what I think,' said Jean in a very level voice. 'Don't forget that I come from an army family, and all my ancestors seem to have fought in some British war or the other. And it's all very well to make jokes about army types and all that, but I do think that when there is a war on it's the duty of every single man and woman to join up. Then again, as a woman, I shrink away from the thought . . . Well, when it comes to one's own loved ones going out to die, then one desperately tries to find reasons why it's not so important to join up.'

'Thanks,' said Henry very dryly. 'It won't be necessary for you to look for reasons explaining why I am not joining . . . ' and abruptly, in mid-sentence, he left the room.

That evening, when he came back from the office, he told her that he had written to head office asking for permission to join the army before the call up, in time to attend the first officers' course in the new year. 'I say,' he added, 'do you think that friend of yours in the Green Howards would be able to pull the necessary strings and get me in quicker?'

'String Cameron? I'm sure he would.'

'Then would you drop him a line, please? Just ask him to get the papers moving.'

With that decision behind him, Henry suddenly felt light and unfettered.

They were leaving for Chinnar on 22 December, which was a Friday. On the 21st, as they were sitting down to breakfast, Henry once again brought up Trevor's name.

'I expect Trevor will be coming to see us to-day,' he said.

Jean looked at him in silence for a moment before she spoke. 'Why does he want to come and see you?' she enquired.

'He hasn't said anything about coming. It's just that I think he may show up. It's customary, you know. All the staff come to the bungalow to say "Happy Christmas" - bring their little cards and cakes with the most bilious king you ever saw.'

'Ought we to make any special arrangements?'

'No. We just smile and look pleasant and say thank you and wish them merry Christmas. I believe Trevor's engagement is going to be announced during the holidays, to Ruby Miranda.' The name rolled off his tongue without the slightest hesitation or awkwardness.

'Did he tell you that?' asked Jean with what he thought was a sudden quickening of interest.

'No. Miss Miranda told me the last time we were in Chinnai, for the Week.'

'I'm so glad. They'll make a very good looking couple.'

Trevor is not going to be here long now, said Henry. 'He will be going up for his training in February. But then if things work out and your friend Sting something plays up, I should be on the same course myself. Fancy having one's own stockman as a fellow cadet! And I'm sure Trevor will do much better than anyone else, with that athletic background.'

'Yes, I think he'll do very well. But so will you. Games aren't everything.'

The last day, the very last day of Eddie Trevor, Henry kept reminding himself as he walked to his office on that bright Thursday morning. He was congratulating himself over the way things were shaping. His efforts to ensure his going on the very first officers' training course were a shining proof of his own sincerity. He was going to get into the war as soon as he could manage it, there was going to be no hanging back, the mere sending off of an application for enrolment had helped to ease the tensions within himself and had even lessened his resentment against Eddie Trevor.

'It's chaps like Wallach who will be sent to die in Germany, and it's chaps like Sudden who will be staying back here, looking after tea and helling around with the women. You keep out of it, try and acquire a game leg so that when the time comes you won't have to go.'

Henry laughed aloud as he remembered Lockburn's drunken words. The time had come, and he, Henry Winton, was going.

No one could have thought of him as a chap like Wallach',

thank God; if anything, he was more a 'chap like Sudden', for which, again, thank God. But there was not the remotest question of his staying out, of acquiring a game leg, as Cockburn had suggested. No one could doubt his keenness to get into the fighting; at the same time, it was just as well not to lay yourself open to the criticism that you, Henry Winton, product of a good public school, had stayed out of the war as long as you could, taking advantage of every loophole in the regulations to put off getting into uniform. The thought of taking a back seat to a man like Eddie Trevor, a daily-wage coolie type soon to be blown up into an officer and a gentleman, no longer loomed immense.

On that last but one Thursday of the year 1939, Henry Winton was at peace with himself. He was even looking forward to Eddie Trevor's coming to wish them a Merry Christmas just before they were due to leave for Chinnar. He would be gracious to him, he had decided, he would be hospitable; he would press him to have a glass of sherry or a cup of coffee, perhaps ask him to stay for dinner. He would rub off the dirty spot on his conscience, the smear left by his deplorable fit of jealousy, by the memory that he had ever fallen so low as to suspect him of having seduced his wife in the gun-room.

All the supervisors and clerks came that evening, dressed in their holiday clothes and bringing their wives with them. They came bearing gifts: garlands and calendars and New Year cards, and home-made sweets called kulkuls and doldols, and brightly coloured Christmas cakes. And Henry and his wife were gracious to them, gracious and charming and hospitable, distributing cigarettes and cups of tea and speaking to everyone with smiles on their faces.

It was only at the end of the evening, after everyone had gone away, that Henry realized Trevor had not come to see them.

'Pythons? There are no pythons about that we know of And with anything else, you're quite safe when you have a dog with you.'

The day Jean had gone for her first afternoon walk, Henry had felt as though he had won a minor victory. It was somehow symbolic, he thought, proof that once again their relationship was drifting back to what it had been before the night of Sudden's visit. After that day Jean had gone for walks regularly, starting soon after three and returning before he came back from the office, at about six in the evening.

One out of those three weeks had already gone, Henry told himself as he glanced at the calendar on the wall of the small laboratory at the back of his office. His Indian clerk was bustling about, getting things ready for the tea ceremony—the periodic ritual of the factory manager's testing and grading of his tea leaf.

'Are you ready sir?'

Henry nodded assent. Even after five years, as a manager, Henry could not help feeling a bit of a fraud as a tea taster, nor account for the sense of pleasurable anticipation set up within him as he waited for the ceremony to start.

The ritual began. The electric kettle was switched on. It was a copper kettle, for some reason it had to be a copper kettle. Then the gleaming porcelain tasting cups were placed in a neat row on the zinc topped table and the hospital bucket placed beside them. After that, tea leaves of different grades were weighed against a silver four anna piece and put into the cups. The water was taken at the moment it came to the boil and poured into the tasting cups. Then came the pause, silent and expectant, for the tea to draw. After that came the emptying of the cups into the shallower porcelain bowls, the removal of the leaves from the cups into their lids, and then the actual tasting—all done with just the right touch of flourish.

As Henry waited for the tea to draw, looking blankly out of the window, he heard the faint barking of a dog in the distance and recognized it to be Herman's. He cocked an ear to locate where the sound could be coming from and wondered why Herman should be barking, but his clerk was already pouring out the tea from the tasting cups into their bowls.

He went through the tasting ceremony with his usual

concentration, drawing in the scalding, amber liquid in large mouthfuls, rolling it round his tongue to savour its bouquet, and then spitting it out neatly into the enamel bucket, turning over the coppery leaves in the saucers with a silver knitting needle, saying a word or two to the clerk hovering solicitously with pad and pencil—grade after grade after grade.

He had still not finished when the office sepoy came in with a piece of paper.

'What is it?' asked Henry with a frown.

'Shrimati Gauri wants to see you.'

'Shrimati Gauri?'

At first the name meant nothing, and Henry looked puzzled. Then he realized that it must be Gauri, Jugal Kishore's niece; now become a Shrimati, an upper class woman. What did it mean? Was she married or was it just a rise in status to go with being the niece of a member of the Legislative Assembly?

'What does she want?' snapped Henry.

'She won't say, sahib. She says she must see you—see you at once.'

'Tell her I don't want to see her,' ordered Henry, shouting the words so that the woman waiting outside could not fail to hear him. 'Tell her never to come here again, never. And if she comes, send her back without coming into tell me! Understand?'

'Jee-sahib,' said the sepoy, and slunk away.

She must have come to ask him for the teacher's job again, Henry thought. He had not refilled the post after Ruby Miranda left. The nerve!—after taking a leading part in the demonstration against him. He wondered where she could be staying, now that neither her uncle nor her brother was employed on his garden; possibly with some coolie or supervisor, he thought with irritation. He did not like the idea of her being at Silent Hill.

That evening, when they were having tea, Henry suddenly remembered Herman's barking.

'What was Herman barking at?' he asked Jean.

Jean stopped in the middle of pouring out tea. 'Barking!' she said, peering at him.

'Well, not his ferocious bark but, you know, the friendly sort of bark when he wants to be fed or let out. . . .'

'Oh, I remember now,' she gave a nervous laugh. 'Monkeys. He was going for some monkeys.'

'That explains it. Extraordinary how far his bark can be heard. I heard it quite distinctly in the laboratory . . . thought you had climbed up a tree or something, just to tease him, or even gone up Wallach's Folly. Those steps always stump him. . . .'

'No,' said Jean a little impatiently. 'Monkeys.'

Were those lines between her eyes getting deeper? Henry wondered. He said, 'He'll be quite ruined as a hunting dog if he goes on at this rate, barking at monkeys. I must break him of the habit. Take him in hand.'

'Well, I'll stop taking him out,' suggested Jean.

He was instantly apologetic. 'No, no,' he protested. 'I didn't mean anything like that. Please don't be upset.'

'But, Henry, I meant exactly what I said; and I'm not upset or anything like that. I don't need Herman with me any more, now that I have got used to the jungle. I don't feel frightened any more. No use ruining Herman as a gun-dog, spoiling all that training.'

'But I'd much rather he was with you when you are out. Oh, I don't give a damn, really, if he takes to chasing monkeys.'

Henry checked himself. The lines on her forehead had deepened once again and her jaw had set, and he sensed the danger signal just in time. 'Just as you like,' he said. 'You needn't take the dog with you if you don't want to.'

'Well, I don't want to,' said Jean with a look of exasperation.

He was at a loss to understand why she was being so unreasonable about the whole thing, but he did not want to say anything that might hurt her feelings.

From the next afternoon, she had not taken Herman with her on her walks; but Henry was glad to see that she had at least continued them. They were obviously doing her a world of good; although Jean looked just as thin as ever, the colour had come back to her cheeks and her speech had lost some of its tremulousness, and at times she looked tanned and bright-eyed and windswept and altogether happy.

And then the elephant god had come back, hovering at the edge of their lives.

It was nearly a week before they were due to start for their Christmas holiday when Henry came back from his office and told Jean

that the one-tusker had been heard of again—after nearly a year.

'I suppose that means I shall have to stop my walks,' she remarked.

'Of course not! It's been reported nearly fifteen miles away from here, on the other side of the Kayna river. Actually beyond our borders—in Bhutan, and of course it may be any old elephant. You know what the villagers are. There is no reason to think that it's the rogue unless we get some sort of confirmation.'

'You mean until it has killed someone?'

'Not necessarily. It can be quite easily identified, with its single tusk. Let's wait until we get a definite identification before getting worked up about the one-tusker.'

'And what happens if they do find out that it's the right one?'

'Then I go and bump it off.'

'Oh!' said Jean frowning. 'Why does it have to be you?'

'Someone has to do it. Besides, it's really not all that dangerous,' answered Henry, touched by her anxiety for him. 'By the way,' he went on, trying to sound very, very casual. 'Trevor has been selected for a commission. The letter came this morning. The letter and also a wire of congratulations from Sudden Dart.'

That was the first time Trevor's name had cropped up in their conversation since the day when he had called to collect Sudden's Purdy. In a sense, it was an indication that their relationship had weathered the storm; now that they could once again talk casually about Eddie Trevor.

'I'm so glad,' said Jean. 'He was so desperate to be accepted.'

'Do you think we ought to ask him for a meal or something?'

'I don't know. I don't see that it's necessary.'

'Except that Sudden would appreciate it. Trevor seems to have become something of a blue-eyed boy of Sudden's.'

'Ask him over then, any time you like.'

'You don't think that it is . . . Well, you don't think there's any special need. . . .'

'No, I don't think so.'

Although Henry was pleased that she had displayed no particular anxiety to see Trevor, he was distressed by her new mood of joyless indifference. This was the sort of incident that often made him think that the gulf between them was as wide as ever; at the same time it also showed that Jean too on her part was making a special

returning his greeting, and then with an exquisite stab of gratitude he noticed that Jean had sat stock-still, staring straight in front of her, as though she had not even noticed Eddie Trevor.

'I wonder when they're going to be married,' said Henry.

'Who?'

'Eddie Trevor and Miss Miranda.'

'Are they engaged?'

'Well, they were going to announce their engagement during the holidays.'

'Then they must be,' said Jean.

In the bungalow, a forest guard, wearing the khaki uniform and the green and red pugree of the forest department, was waiting to see him. He came up to them even as they were getting out of the car and made a low salaam. He told Henry that the one tusker had been reported on the southern bank of the Koyna river.

'Has it killed anyone?' asked Henry.

'No, sahib.'

And has anyone actually seen it?'

'No, sahib.'

'Then how the devil do they know it's the Tista-rogue?'

'Because of the scarecrows, sahib. It has destroyed two in a patch of ragi just on the banks of the Koyna.'

'I don't believe you,' Henry snapped. 'Indian villagers are all liars.'

The jungle in the loop of the Kayna river was the darkest and some of the most impenetrable in the whole of Assam. It was primeval and unexplored. There was almost no cultivation in it and no forest departmental operations. If the elephant really had crossed over to this side of the river, then it had entered some of the most difficult jungle country imaginable. Henry did not relish the idea of having to seek it out in jungle like that.

All the horrors and frustrations and humiliations of that night when he had gone limping and beaten to Lamlung came snarling back after him. The elephant-god had come right into the Koyna valley now; into his, Henry Winton's domain, into a valley he could overlook from the spare-room of his bungalow. The animal had come all the way from Lamlung, thirty miles as the crow flies, even if it had taken a whole year to cover that distance, and unbelievably it had even accomplished the crossing of the wild Koyna river.

What did it mean? Was it coming closer?—looking for him, seeking out the man who had vowed to destroy it?

Damn! Was he losing his nerve? He had not fired at a big-game animal for how long now?—over a year. A year ago, he would have welcomed the news of the rogue elephant's coming so close to his garden, and would have gone after it without the slightest hesitation. Now he seemed to be trying to find all kinds of excuses to make out that the report was not true, knowing in his heart of hearts that it had to be true. The Indian trackers never made a mistake of that kind. The one-tusker was coming closer and closer; it had swum the swirling, roaring Koyna river and it was there, waiting in the dense jungle barely six miles away from his bungalow—waiting for what? Waiting for whom?

The thought of the malignant elephant-god waiting in a dark jungle sent a cold shiver running down his spine.

And then like a shaft of light came relief, bright, tangible, reassuring.

There was no need for him to worry about the one-tusker any more. Just three weeks from now, he would be on his way to Belgaum, learning this business of fighting a gigantic, national enemy whom you fought standing hand-in-hand with thousands upon thousands of comrades in arms, not a private, illusive, treacherous, half-god-half-ghost enemy lurking in a dense forest like the one-tusked rogue.

'Make sure that it's the Tista one-tusker,' he snapped at the forest guard, 'before you come reporting to me. Understand?'

'Jee sahib,' said the guard, bowing low and avoiding his eyes, as though frightened to look into the eyes of a man who had vowed to destroy a god.

29

We don't grow morals

AT the end of the second week in January, Henry had had no reply to his request to join the army, and on Saturday he decided to go to Chinnar and tackle Sudden again. Jean had shrunk from facing the four-hour drive there and back just for a day, and had not wanted to go with him.

'I'll be back fairly early to-morrow; certainly by eleven,' Henry told Jean on Saturday morning as he got into the Austin. He wanted to catch Sudden in the office; his bungalow was hardly the place to have a show-down. It was nearly twelve-thirty when he got to the Brindian office.

As he had hoped, Sudden was still in his office; rose-carpeted, rosewood-panelled, and with the ornate marble fireplace that was said to have been brought over piece by piece from some stately home of England and reconstructed in Sudden's office. The heavy, dull green velvet curtains over the enormous bay-window had been pulled back and secured so that from Sudden's seat you could gaze at the immense panorama of the Brindian empire; a placid, brilliantly sunlit landscape of lake and forest and mountain, blue and green and deep blue again. 'th the icy Himalayan peaks towering far behind, blinding white in the noonday sun. Life-size portraits of all the past Resident Directors looked sternly down from the walls.

Sudden was standing with his back to the fire-place, smoking a cigar and looking like a portrait of himself, and he received Henry with a toothy, too bright smile. If he had had any idea as to why Henry had come to see him, he gave no indication of it.

'Well, Henry?' inquired Sudden, motioning Henry to a chair with his cigar.

'I've come about my release, sir. To-day is the thirteenth, and I shall have to be leaving by the end of the month. I have still received no instructions.'

Sudden was still smiling his too bright smile. Henry did not like it.

'I was hoping you were going to come up this week-end, Henry, though I was not expecting you quite so early,' he said looking pointedly at the clock on the side wall. 'But I am glad you have come.'

Had his orders come? Was that why Sudden was sounding so mellow?

'Have the orders come, sir?'

'Yes, and no,' said Sudden, pursing his lips. 'You see, the command HQ at Naini Tal has agreed to your going on the February course at Belgaum. I have got the orders here. But I very much doubt if you will be able to . . . to take advantage of this special concession.'

'What's to stop me?'

'Well, ordinarily nothing—ordinarily. But in your case, the War Department itself has sent a telegram from Delhi telling Eastern Command to keep you here as long as the provincial government wants.'

'The Assam government, sir? What have they got to do with it?'

'They have no powers as such; they can merely make requests; and they have made such a request to the War Department at New Delhi to keep you here for the time-being. And the War Department, very naturally, has agreed.'

Sudden wore a triumphant grin, and for a wild moment Henry wanted to slap his face. Was this something Sudden himself had engineered?

'But the provincial government can have nothing to do with me, sir,' Henry protested. 'I'm a subject of the home country. What grounds can they have to interfere. . . .'

'I was just coming to that,' said Sudden. 'You see, the Assam government wrote to Delhi telling them that you had . . . that you had very kindly offered to kill a rogue-elephant for them. They said they would appreciate it if you were not called away until the rogue-elephant had been killed. New Delhi agreed like a shot, of course. It was a question of morale-building as well as very sound propaganda . . . and . . . What's the matter, Henry?'

'Did you do this, sir?' asked Henry.

'Me? No,' said Sudden very mildly. 'Oh, no. For one thing it had not occurred to me; indeed, for a time I had rather taken for

28

'Ring in the New'

THE crucial three weeks before Christmas had passed. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the new pattern of their relationship seemed to have hardened, making for itself a smooth groove. It was as though both Henry and Jean had got over the first animal raptures of their married life and settled down to adjust themselves to each other's real selves. It was less hectic, more sober, and on an altogether richer level of life; and yet, judged by the delirious first days of intimacy, it was a pathetically poor substitute.

Was that what happened to all marriages? Henry asked himself.

At least to all outward appearances. Jean was once again her old self, laughing and full of happy impulsiveness. Would she be wholly the same again, ever? Would she surrender her being to him as completely and as wildly as she had done before? Henry kept asking himself without finding the answer. Meanwhile, there were the holidays, the ten days of merry making in Chinnar, and he was happy to see that Jean seemed to be just as eager for them as he was himself.

And so they passed into nineteen forty, once again, dancing and singing *Auld Lang Syne* and drinking champagne and kissing and being kissed. The war was already four months old, but it was a phony war, as the Americans had begun to call it. Everyone knew that it could not remain phony for long, but in the meantime the Highlands Club had lashings of champagne and Scotch to drink the New Year in, and English bacon and tinned mushrooms and Crosse and Blackwell jams for the breakfast of to-morrow and many more to-morrows thanks to Sudden's forethought.

Ring out the Old, Ring in the New! Damn Lieutenant Prien and damn the German U boats! Here's to the battle of the River Plate and to the *Exeter* and the *Achilles* and the *Ajax* and the whole of the Royal Navy! Above all, here's to the Maginot Line! The Maginot Line!

Ring out wild bells to the wild skies! In the classic, time-

honoured manner of British clubs in the East, the Highlands Club was ringing out the Old, ringing in the New.

The news, on the very first day of the New Year, was shockingly unpalatable. For a few minutes, it put the glorious victory of the battle of the River Plate and even the shattering loss of the Royal Oak into the background. It brought out the stark, hidden, undeclared war that was going on within India itself; the war of sedition and intrigue for the overthrow of British rule.

Propped up in bed with one eye barely open and sipping his first cup of tea, Henry Winton had picked up the previous day's *Statesman* and had read that Lala Jugal Kishore, Mazdoor-sangh member of the Assembly from North Tinapur constituency, had been invited to join the Government as minister of plantations.

For a moment, Henry felt a bitter, burning surge of helplessness, as though he had been kicked in the stomach while lying down and unable to retaliate. It was not fair, on the morning after the customary excesses of New Year's eve festivities, to be confronted with this kind of nerve-shattering intelligence.

And then had followed the comforting thought that he himself need not remain in the tea district much longer; that a great war was waiting to draw him in, that all he had to do was to wriggle a little harder and assist the process of being drawn in and thus spare himself the humiliation of having a man like Jugal Kishore probing into his affairs. He might even come inspecting his garden, Henry thought with horror. He was not going to have it; he would be off, fighting the war—fighting a more open war with more conventional weapons even if it was against a more powerful enemy.

Henry shaved and showered, determined to have it out with Sudden before leaving Chinnar; he wanted a definite assurance from Sudden that he would be released in time to attend the first training course due to begin in Belgaum in early February. It was not as though he was making an unreasonable request; he was asking for what was his by right. He had seen the directive to Sudden from the company's board telling him that any of the company's employees who wished to volunteer for the armed forces without waiting to be called up were to be permitted to go, and that their posts were to be held open for them till the end of the war.

Sudden was sitting under his blue-and-white striped umbrella on the lawn, reclining on a heavily cushioned easy chair with his feet

placed on a cane stool in front of him, and he was about to gulp down the fierce-looking mixture of tabasco sauce, tomato juice, and raw egg called a prairie-oyster and said to be an excellent remedy for a hang-over. He looked more like a Roman Emperor than ever, thought Henry, as Nero might have looked on the morning of New Year's day.

'Try one of these, Henry?' Sudden invited, smiling wanly.

'No, thank you, sir,' said Henry. Then he explained why he had come.

Sudden was quite peevish. 'No, Henry, I have not sent up your papers for enrolment because frankly I did not expect you would prove so . . . so unco-operative.'

'I'm very sorry,' said Henry.

'Why can't you wait until you're called up?—like any other man. Dammit! apart from anything else it's . . . it's unpatriotic to rush them like this. The army cannot fit everyone in in the first few courses. They can't train more than a limited number of chaps in each course, and there are all sorts of other categories they have to work through first before coming down to the planters and others who are already doing valuable war jobs. I was told privately that the planters may not have to go until well into 'forty-one.'

'I must get into this as soon as I can.'

'And you don't give a damn what happens here—to your garden.'

'I'm sure you will be able to find someone to run the garden, sir.'

'If you want to know, I have written to every single one of the planters who have retired from here in the last ten years to come and take their jobs on again—offered them the most attractive terms. Only two have agreed to come, and they are not expected here until the end of May.'

'I hadn't realized it was as bad as all that.'

'And yet you can't see your way to staying put until . . . until things ease up a little?'

'No, sir. I'm sorry.'

'Well, there's damn little I can do, Winton, in the face of this absurd view taken by the directors and the Government. I can't stop you if you're determined to go. At the same time, I can't help feeling that you are rather . . . Well, being quite inconsiderate.'

'I'm sorry you look at it that way, Sir Jeffrey,' said Henry. 'But

it's just that I have been told that the next course for officers begins in February, and if I miss it I don't know how long I might have to wait. Perhaps April or May.'

'That would have suited me ideally, Henry I can make some kind of makeshift arrangements by then. I would really appreciate your agreeing to stay put until May.'

'I'm sorry to appear so unaccommodating, sir, but I want to go now, so that I can get into the February course.'

'All right,' said Sudden without exasperation 'All right I will send up your papers. But don't forget that you are rather putting me on the spot, as the Americans say I can't help feeling that you might have been a little more co operative'

They drove back from Chinnar immediately after lunch on Tuesday. Henry was full of his interview with Sudden, and excited about the prospect of having to leave the tea district within the next two or three weeks.

If they send me to Belgaum, would you like to stay in the Club at Chinnar until I finish the course and get a posting, or were you thinking of going to Poona and staying with your aunt? Poona is a nice place, almost like a hill station, and I could come and spend week-ends'

'I don't want to go on living here after you go. I would like to go to Poona as soon as you go off so that I can get into one of the women's services—ATS or WAACs or something. They've a very big military establishment at Poona.'

'Oh,' said Henry. This was the first he had heard of her desire to join one of the women's services. He had been hoping that after he received his commission they would be able to live together in some cantonment town resuming the pattern of their disrupted life.

The realization that if she went into one of the women's services they might be separated for the duration of the war hit him with an almost physical force. After that he drove in silence, feeling deflated and slightly numb. All the way from Tinapur to Silent Hill they did not speak. Just as they were about to turn into their gate, Eddie Trevor's motor-cycle came tooting behind them and when Henry edged the Austin to the left, Eddie went flashing past, waving his hand and shouting 'Happy New Year, Jean! Happy New Year, Mr. Winton!'

Without meaning to, Henry found himself waving back and

granted that the rogue was already dead. But the Assam government seems to think it's still about. No, it wasn't me— it wasn't I. And if I were to make a request like that, I am sure the War Department would have smelt a rat; they would only have taken the view that I was trying to keep my planters here as long as I could on one pretext or another—would not have played up at all. As it was, the request to retain you here was made by the Assam government, entirely on its own; by the minister himself, in fact, on behalf of the government—the new Minister for Plantations, Lala Jugal Kishore.'

'Christ! That swine!'

'I was myself rather taken aback—couldn't make out what was at the back of it all,' said Sudden. 'I knew he couldn't be all that fond of you, to be making a special request to the government to retain you here.'

At the moment, he hated Sudden even more than he hated Jugal Kishore. Jugal Kishore was someone in the background, far away, half-forgotten; Sudden was standing before him, crowing, smirking, triumphant. His nerves tautened and his muscles flexed as though to ward off a blow, and the blood rushed to his head, making his temples throb.

I must not give in now, I must keep control of myself, he kept reminding himself. This was like big-game shooting; it was a time to keep cool. If I explode now, they could kill me, Sudden and Jugal Kishore between them could finish me off. They're partners now, both ranged against me.

There was a lone thought, one flashing, repeating signal somewhere at the back of his mind. Then it came to him.

'Suppose I finish off the elephant before . . . Well, in time for me to go on the February course. Can I not go then?'

'Of course,' Sudden assured him. 'You can go the moment you've killed the rogue. Let it not be said that I held you back even for a day. If you finish the rogue, that is.'

Then, as though he had not sufficiently emphasized the word, he repeated it, 'If.'

'I take it that as far as you are concerned,' said Henry, trying to prevent his voice from giving a sign of the storm that raged within him, 'I can get away the day I have shot the elephant.'

'Rather,' said Sudden. 'Absolutely. You shoot the rogue and go off and become a soldier, Henry, and I'll see that they pin a medal on you.'

'Thank you, sir,' Henry remembered to say.

'And while you are here, old chap, I should like you to do me a favour; in your capacity as a member of the Club committee, I mean. Would you go and carry out a really thorough inspection of the game cottage and put in a report; you know—whatever improvements you consider necessary. General and Lady Maclean are coming here some time next month, and I want to make sure that everything is absolutely tickety-boo. If Jock Maclean can manage it, he is going to bring the C-in-C for a day or two.'

'I'll see to it this afternoon, sir,' said Henry.

'Oh, no hurry, you know; no hurry at all. Any time you like. Just go and have a look so that we can get the place all shipshape.'

Sudden's voice still bore the jarring suspicion of triumph, making it clear to Henry that he was not really asking him to do a favour, but ordering him, just as he had done for the past five years, confident that he would go on doing so in the future. It was time to make a dent in that overbearing conceit.

'So the Minister for Plantations has already started throwing his weight around?' said Henry.

Sudden gave him a sharp look. 'What? Oh, yes; Lala Jugal Kishore certainly looks as though he is going to make his presence felt.'

'It's a shame that a man like Jugal Kishore should be in a position to interfere with our labourers, sir,' said Henry very quietly, not wishing to overplay his hand. 'You know, of course, that it was Jugal Kishore who stirred up all that labour trouble at Silent Hill.'

'Yes, I do.'

'The coolies, by and large, consider him their leader, the man who will get them better rates of pay and better living conditions—he used to take a cut from their pay every month to act as their spokesman, and they paid cheerfully. With the power he now has, he can ... he can paralyse the working of any garden the whole tea district.'

'Humm; he certainly is a very powerful man, now,' Sudden agreed.

Was Sudden blind, or was he being deliberately dense? Did he have to be told the sort of ordeals Jugal Kishore could subject the tea industry to?

'You may not have had much contact with him, Sir Jeffrey, may

not know what kind of man he is. He is cunning and shifty, quite unprincipled, quite unscrupulous. He would be a most dangerous enemy.'

'Oh, I know all that, Henry. Tell me, was that why you . . . you became rather suddenly anxious to join the army?'

Henry recoiled at the implication. 'As you know, sir, I had applied to go long before Jugal Kishore became a minister.'

'Yes, of course,' Sudden remembered. 'That's right. As soon as Eddie Trevor heard that he had been selected for a commission.'

'But I have no hesitation in admitting that if I had not applied already, Jugal Kishore's becoming our minister would have certainly made me do it. I cannot bear the man; knowing what harm he is capable of doing, knowing how morally corrupt he is. If it came to that, I would even have offered my resignation rather than . . .'

'Getting into the war will spare you all that,' Sudden pointed out.

'There's no denying that the war, in this sort of situation, is something of a godsend; with a man like Jugal Kishore in a position of almost absolute authority over the affairs of the tea district; a man who bears me a personal grudge. I shudder to think what sort of trouble he would be creating here.'

'What sort of trouble?'

'Well, he can privately instigate the coolies to go on strike on some minor issue and then sit in judgment over . . . over the Brindian Company. He could force us to increase wages, build better houses, provide more medical facilities, give them provident funds—the whole book of the new labour laws. He's capable of anything, and he will do it too . . . leave no stone unturned to paralyse the tea business.'

'And why do you think he would be doing all this, Henry?' asked Sudden. 'What would be his aim?'

'Aim? To become more powerful; to harry the British; to undermine the war effort and win greater support from the labourers.'

Sudden shook his right hand slowly in a gesture of denial, taking care not to disturb the ash on his cigar. 'No, Henry; you don't know your babu politician. Politics are his business, just as growing tea is yours and mine. We grow tea for no other reason than because it gives us the wherewithal to live according to our standards; he goes into politics for much the same reason. I grant you that he is

capable of raising all the trouble you have described, and more. And yet, he won't be doing it for any of the reasons that you have detailed. There is only one aim, one motive force?"

'Nationalism?'

'Far from it. Money.'

'Money!'

'Yes, Henry. You don't know your India as well as some of us here do. When you said a moment ago that Jugal Kishore would be a most dangerous enemy, you couldn't have been more right. But we are not going to have him as an enemy; we are going to keep him here as a friend, as someone . . . as someone batting on our side.'

'And how are you going to manage that?'

'Don't be naïve, Henry; we have already managed it. By buying him off, of course. Did you know that the Brindian Tea Company contributed five thousand rupees to his election expenses, and the other two companies two thousand each? Do you know that the day he became Minister for Plantations he was given an assurance, on behalf of all three companies, that he would be given a regular monthly remuneration of one thousand rupees if he stayed on our side? Jugal Kishore, thank heavens, is not like some of the other ministers I can name—inaccessible. He is wholly amenable . . . to listen to reason, particularly when reason is accompanied by the tinkle of rupees.'

'You mean you are—the companies are—bribing him, paying hush-money to a man like Jugal Kishore?'

'We don't grow morals in the tea district, Henry; we grow tea. And whatever is conducive to the growth of tea, we foster. To us here, it is a simple matter of hard, business arithmetic. The whole year's expenditure on keeping a man like Jugal Kishore on our side is as nothing compared to having a one-day strike in the entire tea district—like the strike you had.'

'But . . . but hush-money,' said Henry, still sounding shocked. 'Blackmail!'

'There's nothing wrong with the judicious payment of money to keep the right people on our side; indeed it might be called the bed-rock of the Empire's frontier strategy. As you know, we pay lakhs of rupees every year to the tribesmen on the North-West Frontier, just to keep them quiet—just to behave themselves. Those who have to run the business of the Empire have found the system in-

valuable. As Jock Maclean always says, it is better to pay a lakh of rupees to a tribal village to behave itself than spend ten lakhs of rupees in sending a brigade to destroy the village.'

'But how do you know . . . How can anyone tell that a man like Jugal Kishore will not let all of you down . . . Whenever he is faced with making the choice between labour and management?'

'For the excellent reason that the coolies don't pay him a thousand rupees a month. He will side with us just as long as we side with him. Jugal Kishore's becoming the minister of this new portfolio they have created, the Minister for Plantations, is going to be an unmixed blessing, so far as the tea companies are concerned. Let's hope he stays in his post. In his public speeches, he has promised to put in a good word for the tea companies, and to appeal to the labourers that now, in times of war, they must be prepared to make sacrifices; privately, of course, he has promised to do much more. Oh, he's a good man to have on one's side, but I should hate to have him as an enemy.' And Sudden glanced meaningfully at Henry.

'Thank God I won't be having to . . . to make efforts to keep on the right side of such a character!'

'Depending on how soon you finish off that elephant, Henry,' Sir Jeffrey reminded him. 'And remember that there are others who have to . . . have to face up to these higher-level problems, whether they like it or not. That's why they pay us the kind of salaries they do. Otherwise all of us would take the easy way out and join up, and to hell with Bimidian and tea!'

'I'm sorry to give you such an impression, Sir Jeffrey,' said Henry. 'But I should like to . . . to offer you my sincere congratulations on the way you have . . . have tackled a character like Jugal Kishore.'

'These things come naturally, Henry,' said Sudden, looking very pleased with himself. 'If one bears in mind that the company's interests come first, always and every time. Do you remember my asking you at Silent Hill, the day of the strike, whether we should pay something to Jugal Kishore to keep your labourers quiet and you said "No"? Well, Arkell's advice was quite the opposite. Arkell has been in the police in this country for twenty years. He knows his Indian far better than any of us. "Beat them up only if you cannot buy them off cheaply," Arkell always says. So the three Resident Directors at Chinnai met here, in this room, and decided

to send Jugal Kishore an offer to help him out with his election expenses. Worked like magic; you must have noticed how well behaved your labourers have been since the strike.'

'I certainly have, they are singularly docile.'

'That's the way all big business has to be done. One thing we do know is that we cannot afford to have any strikes. You won't, of course, mention any of this to anyone, will you. Not to any of the other managers or anyone '

'No, sir.'

Sudden looked at the wall clock. 'Ah, one o'clock. Time for tiffin. You staying over for the week-end?'

'No, sir, I'm going back early to-morrow morning.'

'You won't forget to take a look at the game cottage, will you?' Sudden reminded him

30

A Toast to the Jungle Night

HENRY never ceased to marvel at the care and thought which had gone into the building of the game cottage. The tree on which it was built was a wild fig tree—a softwood variety—and it was not strong enough to support the weight of the cottage, admirably as its luxuriant foliage served as camouflage.

The cottage actually rested on a platform propped on a dozen stout logs of sal and toon wood—left unfashioned so that they looked like tree trunks.

Henry and Pasupati examined the two ladders, rung by rung, tapping each joint with a wooden mallet, testing the bolts and hooks that kept the rope-ladder tethered to the cross-beam, tugging with purposeful violence at every single part and testing its soundness.

The rope-ladder, with heavy, four-inch-wide, coir-covered rungs which led to the first platform, was perhaps easier to climb than the second ladder made of steel and teak. The second ladder, fifteen-foot long, was placed at a slight incline with its feet fixed firmly into sockets cut into the platform; it was secured at the top near the fork of the tree with numerous twists of heavy coir rope.

‘You’d have to hack at it with an axe to shift that rope,’ remarked Henry to Pasupati.

He inspected the covered approach to the foot of the ladder; banged each one of the supporting props, looking for evidence of any white-ant damage; and he even sent Pasupati to sound the flooring of the cottage from below. Then they climbed into the cottage itself, and Henry tested every one of the planks and the joints of the verandah bench and the two bunks in the bedroom. He even examined the primitive bathroom furniture, and finally he tested the pulley arrangement outside the passage window and the entire length of the fifty-pound-strength rope used to pull up food and drink and light luggage to the cottage.

Pasupati seemed to have looked after the cottage well; it was in wonderful shape, for General Maclean or the C-in-C or even the Viceroy and his wife. All that needed to be done was to get the cushions on the bench done up again and perhaps give a lick of varnish to the beds and the bathroom furniture; and if they had money to play with, a couple of sponge-rubber mattresses for the bedroom bunks, and perhaps a proper porcelain filter with a tap for drinking water in place of the two-gallon earthenware barrel.

Henry finished his inspection before six o'clock because he wanted to be alone and by himself for the sunset. He sent Pasupati off to bring his dinner from the Club and warned him not to come back before nine. After that, they would test the electric moon.

It was wonderful to be alone, alone with one's thoughts, alone with a bottle of Hennessy brandy waiting solemnly for the sun to go down before the first drink of the day. The jungle was full of its closing-hour sounds, and the shafts of sunlight came slanting through the trees, making sharp geometrical patterns of light and shade. God, how he had ached to be alone!

The sun went down and a hush fell over the jungle, as though for a pause for prayers. Henry poured out his drink, mixed it with water from the earthenware barrel, and drank to the sunset. This was the life God intended for man. He recalled an inscription on the wall of the Dewan-i-Khas in the Red Fort at Delhi, and repeated it to himself, *If there be a heaven on earth; it is this, it is this, it is this!*

Within a minute the pause for prayers was over; the myriad sounds of the jungle came on again: the mournful hum of the breeze through the bamboos, the gossip of the monkey in the distance, the metallic chirping of the tree-frogs, the dissent of the did-you-do-it birds, the matronly clucking of the jungle hens, the wail of the Himalayan cuckoo, the machine-gun stutter of the wood-pecker—a thousand separate sounds making up the composite even-song of the jungle, soothing and mesmeric.

The shadows lengthened, the light turned from grey-green to purple, then faded out altogether. The bird noises stopped one by one and a great enveloping silence came on, with the forlorn honk of a sambhar somewhere in the distance to underscore its immensity.

Henry gave himself up to the jungle night, finding a voluptuous pleasure in the act of surrender, and peace poured into his mind.

One by one, the ghosts lurking in his consciousness like dark shadows became paler and paler and vanished: the one-tusked rogue, Jugal Kishore, Eddie Trevor, Sudden Dart—all of them went flitting out of his mind leaving nothing but a towering darkness which mingled with the darkness outside. He was alone with the jungle, completely at home, his mind fully in tune with all creation.

He poured himself another drink, carefully topped the glass with water and drank. He made a face because it was almost neat brandy. He put his head back and drained the glass in one long draught and the brandy went coursing down his throat like liquid fire. He lifted his feet onto the wooden bench and sank back, enjoying its narrowness, the unyielding hardness of the wooden slats. He dozed, forgetting time and place, forgetting life itself.

He opened his eyes with a start and noticed the thin, snake-like camouflaged rope of the luggage pulley dancing up and down in the pale moonlight and making a slight swishing sound. He came awake in the instant and looked at his watch. It was already past nine o'clock. Pasupati had obviously brought his dinner. He went to the passage window and gave a long, low whistle, and heard the answering whistle from below. He gave the rope a cautious, warning jerk and then began to pull up the basket over the pulley. When it was half-way up, he again whistled to Pasupati to come and join him.

Henry unhooked the cane basket and carried it into the bedroom. He switched on the tiny, hooded electric light powered by a flashlight battery. From the verandah he brought his bottle of brandy. Then he opened the lid of the basket.

There was a whole cold chicken and a salad and buttered rolls, a big thermos flask of coffee, and six lemon tarts. With a sharp stab of memory, he thought of the tarts Ruby Miranda had sent him at his bungalow. As he looked at the tarts, nestling snugly in their crimped paper tray, he was assailed by an acute longing for Ruby. His whole system craved for her with a fierce insistence; to crush her into his arms, to feel the hardness of her taut breasts, the nipples burning patches of fire into his chest, to smother her whole smooth honey-coloured body with kisses, became an urgent, almost insane longing. From nowhere at all, an intense, burning thirst had sprung up; it was both physical and emotional, and quite irrepressible. It was the sort of longing that people commit murders

for, he told himself. Was this how Eddie Trevor loved her?

He poured himself another drink, this time without any water, and drank to Ruby Miranda, to the Ruby Miranda of a little over a year ago, his Ruby Miranda, not Trevor's, naked and wanton and no longer concerned about the light, lying on the sponge-rubber mattress of the spare-room, lying on the Mirzapuri carpet of the gun-room with the glow of a fire making a halo for her hips and breasts and hair, accentuating the voluptuous contours of the harem favourite with the bold, challenging eyes of the Chandni-Chowk whore. . .

When he opened his eyes, she was there, in the tiny bedroom of the game cottage, standing just within the circle of light and smiling at him, wearing a short raincoat with a hood covering her raven hair, looking pale and breathless and expectant.

He stared mutely at her, not saying a word, not asking questions, not believing his eyes, and yet desperately wanting to believe. She came and stood over him and pulled him up, and they kissed.

They lay on the hard wooden floor of the verandah, locked in each other's arms, and the roast chicken and the tarts waited in the next room. It was cold but they were naked, taking their warmth from each other's bodies, they were hungry but they had no desire to eat. Nothing mattered, nothing, except that they were together, in each other's arms, after more than a year of separation they were in a world of their own high up above the earth, and they wanted each other with a fierceness that knew no barriers.

This was love, this was what Jean too was capable of giving and had withheld from him, this was the kind of love that was going to be Eddie Trevor's.

It was when they were plucking the cold chicken, dressed once again and sober and hungry and relaxed, that she explained. 'Pasupati came with me up to the ladder. I told him to go back. He's coming for me in two hours.'

'That means by to-morrow morning everyone in Chinnai will be talking about your coming here.'

'No. Pasupati's mistress is my maid at the Club. She happens to be married to one of the bar boys. Pasupati cannot tell.'

'Are you sure?'

'Don't worry, darling. Pasupati will do anything I tell him. Anything at all.'

'Where have you parked the car?'

'At the golf-course annexe.'

'Won't someone find out about that?'

'I park it there every night.'

She had all the answers. There was no need to worry about the proprieties. This was a time of taking, not of worrying about consequences.

'Now that I know the way, the next time I could come by myself,' said Ruby.

'The next time?'

'Of course, darling.' She drew his face to hers and kissed him on the mouth. 'The next and the next and the next.'

'It's quite dangerous.'

'It's only about ten minutes walk from the road, and the path is well defined. There's no danger of missing it.'

'But it isn't safe.'

'All right. I'll bring Pasupati with me every time.'

Then he realized that they were not thinking of the same kind of danger. 'I wasn't thinking of the danger from wild animals,' he explained.

'Oh, darling. Life is short, and there is a war on, and one by one we are all going to get into it. You will be going soon, and then I want to join too. Don't you . . . don't you want me to come here?'

'Of course I do,' he assured her, and then, realizing the inadequacy of his words, added, 'I want you to more than anything else in the world.'

Ruby pulled his head to hers and kissed him again. 'Then stop worrying. Nobody thinks of you. Shall we have coffee?'

'We'll have coffee afterwards,' he said, rising to his feet.

'Afterwards?'

'Come,' he said, pulling her up. 'We'll go into the verandah, where there is no light.'

Even in the dim light of the hooded lantern, he thought he saw her blush.

An hour or so later, when they had finished the coffee and were sitting close together on the bench overlooking the salt-lick, he remembered to ask her, 'What about . . . what about your engagement?'

He felt her body go rigid under his arm. 'It's all off,' she said.

'Oh. Can one ask why?'

Ruby turned as though to look at him, peering at his face in the darkness. 'Don't you know? —you, of all people?' she asked.

'No. Why should I? Trevor never talks to me of his . . . his private life.'

'I bet he doesn't,' sneered Ruby. 'Oh, I bet he doesn't!'

That must have been a new expression she had heard someone use in the last few days, thought Henry.

'And if you don't know,' said Ruby clutching his hand and kissing it, 'then you don't deserve to'

He wanted to take her into his arms, but the pulley rope was whipping up and down, making a slight frou frou as it swung. Pasupati had come to escort Ruby back, and he was announcing his arrival.

'We must meet again soon, but we must be very careful,' said Henry. 'Where?'

'Here,' answered Ruby. 'This is the safest place.'

'Promise you'll come again,' begged Henry

'I shall come here again,' she promised, 'whenever you want me to.'

Henry slept soundly that night, his sleep undisturbed by night-mates of Indian politicians or wild elephants. It was only after the sun had risen that Pasupati woke him. Henry gave the boy a ten-rupee note, and although he accepted the lavish tip with a suitably low salaam, he neither smiled nor raised his face to meet Henry's eyes.

Henry drove away without stopping for breakfast at the Club. He drove fast, and by eleven he was back at his bungalow at Silent Hill.

31

The View from Wallach's Folly

THE time had come to exorcise his nightmare. There were only two weeks left in which to kill the elephant if he wanted to be released in time for his military training. The fact that it had to be finished to a deadline made the task seem somewhat less difficult. It was almost a relief, doing something positive, coming face to face with fear itself.

His throbbing, compulsive urge to kill the one tusker had corrupted his whole attitude towards hunting. He was surprised at the change in himself, surprised and slightly ashamed too. He was fully conscious of the fact that a true hunter is not afraid of the thing he wants to kill, nor does he hate it; indeed, in a sense he loves that which he seeks to destroy. What a hunter looks forward to is the chase itself, the matching of wits against an animal of the jungle on its own ground, and then coming face to face with it; not the actual act of killing—the killing nearly always came as an anticlimax.

All this was no longer true of himself. Henry knew that he was secretly afraid of the elephant, and hated it because he was afraid, to destroy it was all important, how he tracked it down, how he shot it, was of little importance. If he could have enticed the animal to the salt-lick below the game cottage and shot it from the safety of the thirty-feet high perch in the verandah, he would have been fully satisfied. If there were some way of giving it a monstrous dose of poison or of blowing it up with a grenade-tipped harpoon placed in its path, he would have felt no compunction in doing either.

If he could only manage to press down the fear welling within him until he had killed the elephant, then he would have nothing to fear, ever, for that would be like conquering fear itself. The one-tusker had become a symbol, not just a rogue to be hunted down; a symbol and also a deadly and cunning adversary equally determined to seek him out and destroy him, an enemy more hateful

than Jugal Kishore himself—a private Hitler. For the moment, it was the supreme, all-pervading presence, blotting out the horizons of his mind. Until the elephant was killed, he, Henry Winton, would know no peace.

‘Aren’t you even going to take a guide with you?’ asked Jean as he was cleaning out the four-sixty-five. She was sitting on the gun-room carpet, leaning against his desk, and the dog was curled up beside her, watching him with reproachful eyes.

‘A guide? Lord no! Not in the Koyna valley.’

No more lame shikaris incapable of looking after themselves; no more faulty ammunition, either.

‘It’s always safer to have another man with you.’

No, it was not necessarily safer. Jean did not know anything about elephant hunting; Jean, with her pretty, magazine cover face and red-gold hair; Jean, the prancing English-bred filly now subdued and bewildered by the combined impact of the jungle and of Anglo-India. She only knew about making love; she did not know anything about rogue-elephants.

She knew even less about the Koyna jungle; the jungle that lay like a pretty green carpet at the bottom of the valley she could look down into from the windows of the spare-room.

‘Yes, it’s usual to take along a man who knows the jungle,’ Henry explained very patiently. ‘But all a guide does is track the animal down for you. When it comes to the actual killing, they’re often a damned nuisance. They . . . they can’t even look after themselves. Besides, there is no guide, no shikari who knows the Koyna valley. It is unexplored country. Somewhere on the other side is Bhutan, the most isolated country in the world. The boundary line between ourselves and Bhutan lies somewhere the other side of the river; no one knows where—nor does it matter much, for no one ever goes there. On the farther side, there is literally no habitation in a twenty-mile-wide belt—for the simple reason that it’s uninhabitable. On our side, there are perhaps half a dozen minute clearings, with a couple of huts in each of them—in all perhaps a hundred aborigines in an area of two hundred square miles. I’ve gone in only once, right down to the river, and it is certainly very . . . very forbidding. We were tracking a wounded ghurial. We never found him; he plunged into the river and was washed away right under our eyes. It sounds odd now but I had resolved never to go into the Koyna forest again.’

'It all seems so . . . so impossible, doesn't it?' said Jean. 'What do you mean to do, Henry?'

'I mean to shoot the elephant; I have to shoot him within the next two weeks,' said Henry very evenly.

There was no way of telling Jean how he proposed to go about it; he did not know himself. He had no cut-and-dried plan. All he had thought of doing was to go into the Koyna jungle and range through it along whatever game paths he could find till he came upon the tracks of the elephant. After that, he would have to follow the tracks and catch up with it; but much would depend on the kind of jungle the elephant had gone into.

His feelings oscillated between extremes of confidence and despair. At times he could not see why he should not be able to make a neat, clean job of the whole thing. He had the experience and the skill, and he had shot elephants before. At the other extreme, there were moments of sheer panic when he would see himself being attacked by the elephant, the enormous, horny feet bearing down upon him, the single copper-coloured tusk poised for its plunge—it did not bear thinking about.

But taking a shikari with him would not have made it any easier. He had to do it alone. In the kind of jungle in which he was going to have to take on the elephant, there would be no place to run, and there would be no tree that one could climb in a hurry, and there was no likelihood of seeing the elephant before it was actually charging at you. It had to be done by one man; a combination of a master rifle-shot and shikari—himself. In all honesty, he could not think of any other man in the tea district who could qualify.

He eased the barrel on the stock and pressed down the fore-end below the barrel. He broke open the breech and put in two dummy cartridges with spring caps. He pressed the triggers and broke the rifle again and the two cartridges flew out with a resounding 'ping' of the ejector mechanism and fell with a thud on the thick pile of the Mirzapur carpet which still smelt faintly of Chanel.

He picked up the two cartridges and wiped them with an oily rag, conscious that his wife and his dog were following his movements with their eyes. But he did not feel irritated; he was a man doing a man's job with smooth efficiency, a man preparing himself to face danger.

'The cook was saying that to-morrow is not a good day to go out hunting,' said Jean.

'Really! Why not?'

'Something to do with some festival. It is called Sankranti; the night belongs to the goddess of destruction.'

What did she know about the meshes of Hindu superstition? Wasn't then life already complicated enough without having to pay heed to that sort of nonsense from the servants? He must speak to the cook about it.

'I'm not going to hunt at night,' said Henry, laughing in order to conceal his annoyance. 'Even in broad daylight it's going to be pretty difficult to kill this elephant, I can assure you in that sort of jungle. I wouldn't think of going after him at night.'

'But what is wrong with starting the day after? Why start on a day they say is particularly inauspicious?'

'Every day matters,' answered Henry. 'The sooner I start tracking the elephant, the better. I have only two weeks in which to get him.'

He opened his desk and took out his bunch of keys. He went up to the steel ammunition cupboard which no servant was permitted to open. He fitted the key and threw open the door.

Ammunition was more precious than ever now, because of the war. Whatever cartridges he had would have to last him for the duration. The cupboard had three shelves, all neatly stacked with different kinds of ammunition. On the top shelf were the Mauser and the two two cartridges, flat, red, and yellow boxes with Remington and BSA labels. The centre shelf was crammed full with boxes of shotgun shells. There were forty-two boxes, each of twenty-five shells, and in a corner a dozen or so loose cartridges—just over a thousand in all.

On the lowest shelf were the heavy rifle cartridges. As always, whenever he opened the ammunition cupboard, Henry's eyes flickered momentarily towards the right-hand corner where the solitary box of his old cartridges was kept, still with the sixteen shells in it, all looking deceptively fresh and business-like. There was no point in keeping them any more, of course, though at the time it had seemed important to preserve the evidence of the cartridges which had failed to go off only as a last resort, of course, and only if the need ever arose. That need had never arisen, thanks to Cockburn, and now the faulty cartridges merely served as a

reminder of a vanishing nightmare. Whatever remnant of guilt those cartridges were capable of bringing back was going to be washed away within the next few days. That would be the time to get rid of the cartridges, Henry reminded himself—after he had killed the one-tusker.

In the left-hand corner of the lowest shelf were the five new boxes of the four-sixty-five shells; all opened, each box tested, all firing beautifully.

Henry picked up two boxes of the fresh cartridges and put them in his haversack.

'Will you be taking tea with you or coffee?' Jean wanted to know.

'Neither, don't want to add to my load. Just a packet of sandwiches and the water bottle.'

'No cigarettes, I suppose.'

'Not when I go out hunting.'

He went to bed early and instantly fell into a dreamless sleep. And he came awake refreshed and with a delightful feeling of expectancy and adventure on that first day of the hunt. He was shaved and dressed and ready at six, just as the number-one boy brought out his breakfast.

It was good to be eating an early morning hunting breakfast once again. He tackled the cold tin peaches, soft-boiled eggs, toast and tea with relish. It was a bitterly cold and clear January morning and although he knew that it would make him feel too hot later in the day, he put on his short, silk-lined leather jacket over his khaki drill bush shirt and wrapped his scarf with the Mill Hill colours round his neck.

He tiptoed into the bedroom and saw that Jean was already awake, curled tightly in the blankets. He bent down to kiss her on the cheek and unexpectedly she offered him her mouth. Her kiss lingered, warm and sleep-ridden, and he was reluctant to draw away from it. When he went out, he walked with a light step, still feeling the pressure of her lips upon his. On the tall waist-high table on the verandah were his rifle and haversack, the binoculars, the kukri, and his double-Tera Gurkha hat. The number one boy was waiting with the water-bottle and the packet of sandwiches wrapped in grease-proof paper. The boy saluted as Henry stepped out into a cold winter dawn.

Henry left the mule-track soon after skirting Wallach's Folly and struck off down the hill-path going down into the valley. He knew the path right up to the river; it was clear and well-defined till it reached the floor of the valley. After that it became an indistinct, spidery game-trail. But then there was no danger of missing it if you were a trained jungle man.

He went scrambling down the hill-side, his pace quickened by the steep slope. It was nearly eight o'clock before he reached the floor of the valley and the end of the path. From now on, it would be elephant grass and bamboo right up to the river where it plunged through its fifty-foot deep gorge, still more than three miles away. He sat down for a brief rest before entering the jungle.

He had come to a small clearing about fifty yards by a hundred, nearly as large as a football field. A clump of tall trees stood in the middle, forbidding any kind of growth in their shadow except the humblest bushes and the coarsest, most stunted grass. Near the edge of the clearing was a fallen tree, the dead king of the tribe, looking majestic even in its decay. The patch was perhaps the only piece of relatively open ground within miles.

Henry sat on the trunk of the dead tree feeling hot round the collar and staring blankly at the wall of jungle facing him.

This was no ordinary Himalayan forest. It was a mixture of bamboo and pure elephant grass fifteen feet high. It was by no means impenetrable, for you could force your way almost anywhere through the tall, swishing grass, but all the time it was like groping in the dark. It was not clean and bright like the jungle surrounding the game cottage, if that jungle was God's own jungle, this surely had a touch of the devil about it. There were no paths through it, no bird sounds, only the occasional grating screech of some startled tree frog. It was as though it bore some kind of a curse.

And once again, Henry was confronted with the immensity of the task that faced him. It was certainly no jungle to go hunting dangerous animals in: it was a veritable death trap.

He felt suddenly disheartened and weary as though the curse of the jungle was in some way infecting his own spirit. He could not hope to cover even a square mile of this kind of jungle in a whole day. How did one go looking for an elephant in grass higher than any elephant? The beast could be five yards away from you and yet invisible, and completely soundless too, because of the incessant rustling sounds of your own passage through the grass and under-

growth. The elephant, on the other hand, could scent you out and come for you unerringly, as though you were standing in an open field, waiting to be attacked. The grass which blinded you and obstructed you was no hindrance to an elephant.

Henry opened his water-bottle and drank a couple of mouthfuls. It tasted foul and heavy, like cold oil. There were drops of perspiration on the back of his hands and the sweat had begun to trickle down his armpits. He was already nearly a thousand feet below the level of Silent Hill, and it was breathless and humid in the valley. For the first time on a hunting day, he wished he had brought cigarettes with him.

Henry shook his frame, uttered an unaccustomed Hindi oath, and rose to his feet. He took off his zipper jacket, stuck it on a broken bamboo shoot and strode into the jungle, feeling just a little lighter and cooler.

He did not see the one-tusker that day, nor on the next day or the next five days. He went out every morning, starting at six, carrying a heavy, useless gun and an even more useless pair of binoculars. The only place where he could use the binoculars was when he got to the edge of the river, to scan the forest on both banks. He had found plenty of use for his kukri, however. Five years earlier, his Gurkha chowkidar had taught him how to wield a kukri, and he had practised the various strokes with diligence, passing the final test of severing the head of a full-grown ram at one sweeping, slanting stroke. Now he used the kukri a hundred times a day, blazing a path on some tree to mark his path, hacking a passage through a tangle of weeds, chopping down countless thorny creepers tearing at his clothes.

But the elephant was there, on the southern bank of the Koyna; of that there was not the slightest doubt. Henry had come across its droppings on the very first day, and had also seen evidence of its lordly passage through the bamboos and reeds: but that trail had been at least two weeks old. The heaps of dung had almost disintegrated, and the bamboos it had broken and torn while feeding had dried up.

Nor could there be any doubt that the elephant in the valley was none other than the one-tusked rogue; for along the trail of destruction through the forest there was enough conclusive evidence of the special damage caused by the single powerful tusk, like

indiscriminate sword-cuts in the forest, always to the right of the trail—just the one tusk to help the animal rip open the palm-trees, shift awkward branches out of the way; the one tusk to thrust joyfully into anthills, to be rubbed in sheer ecstasy against some specially favoured tree.

There was, of course, no question of taking up the old trail. What Henry had decided to do was to range the game-path every day, beginning from the clearing in the forest right up to the river, and hope that the elephant would have crossed the path somewhere during the past few hours. Only then would there be a chance of being able to follow it and come to grips with it; and then only if the jungle were a little less dense than the reed and bamboo growth surrounding the clearing, and if the elephant was going at a reasonably slow pace, and if the elephant didn't get his own scent first—so many formidable 'ifs'.

Every day, twice a day, Henry went up and down that three-mile stretch of the game-track as far as the river, banking on the wandering habits of elephants, knowing that some day he would have to cross the track.

The river was the boundary line, the sharply-drawn, uncrossable chasm cleaving through the black forest, like a deep sword-cut in the landscape, and every time he came upon the waters rushing through the great black and white rocks worn into smooth animal shapes with erosion, he could not help wondering how the elephant could have accomplished the crossing of the Rakosi gorge.

Towards four o'clock he would set out back for his bungalow, pausing briefly in the open patch in the jungle where the foot-path from the hill came into the floor of the valley, and he would sit on the dead tree for a rest before beginning the last grinding three-mile climb back to Silent Hill. Every day, he looked at the zipper leather jacket hanging forlornly on the bent bamboo where he had left it on the first morning. He had not taken it back that day, not wishing to add an extra three pounds to his load. From the second day onwards, it had somehow become a symbol of his quest. He would take it back only on the last day, *after* he had killed the elephant.

It was good to be thinking of a time *after* he had killed the elephant.

On Sunday, as he returned to the clearing on his way home, he felt more than noticed that the elephant had already been there.

And then he saw that his jacket was no longer hanging on the broken bamboo. He found it lying near the edge of the field, and it was crushed and mud-stained and in tatters, having been trampled upon and dragged through the thorns and stabbed once, just once, by a single tusk.

Henry examined the ground carefully, refusing to jump to conclusions, just as Kistulal would have done, he told himself; and he decided that the elephant had come into the clearing some time quite early in the morning, possibly just as he had left it. Now it was too late to follow its trail: he had certainly no wish to come face to face with the elephant in the dark.

To-morrow, he would take up the trail from here. By this time to-morrow, he would either have killed the elephant or died in the attempt.

He looked at the state of his strong, silk-lined, English-made jacket, and shuddered in spite of himself.

And once again the thought of death came on like a tempest, sweeping aside everything else and swamping his mind with an immense, dark fear. He did not want to die, duelling with a crafty elephant on its own chosen ground.

He did not want to die, he wanted to live; he had everything to live for, and he had nothing to die for except the venom of a black man who had become a minister and the face-saving compulsions of a pompous fool straight out of Kipling. He had a wonderful job in God's own country, and a lovely story-book wife waiting for him with a warm kiss in a lovely story-book bungalow; a fire lit and crackling, music, whisky, a hot bath, roast pheasant for dinner. He was the man they referred to in the advertisements as the man who had everything—he even had a mistress.

Henry looked at his watch. It was already half-past five. By this time to-morrow he would either have killed the one-tusker or be dead himself, he thought again, and shuddered. He had to get away from this place, tear himself away from the mood it provoked. It was already late; Jean would begin to worry if he did not return before dark. He got up, smoothed out his jacket, and put it on another broken bamboo close by. Then he turned for home.

The fire was there, when he returned, and the whisky and the scalding hot bath and the pheasant and the story-book wife anxiously inquiring why he was late.

He did not tell Jean why he was late, nor that he was hoping to

run into the elephant the next day, nor could he bring himself to eat a single morsel of food.

He went to bed early but he could not sleep; although his limbs were tired, his brain was feverish. A fear, cold and unreasoning, had been building up within him; the horror of the evening when Kistulal had been trampled down by the elephant, its gait looking lop-sided because of that single tusk, trampled down while he, Henry, had stood by watching as though spellbound, powerless to help, came rushing back at him from all sides. It was hours before he dropped off into an uneasy sleep; and he must have been moaning and talking in his sleep, for he woke with a start to find Jean leaning over him looking anxious and asking if he was all right. He was sweating heavily in spite of the bitterly cold night.

It was long past seven before he came awake the next morning, and cursed the boy for not bringing his tea sooner. He felt tight-eyed and dozey and shrank away from the thought of breakfast. He drank three cups of weak tea, waved to his wife from the bedroom door, and set out for the big day.

He had intended to reach the clearing earlier than usual so that he could pick up the previous day's trail with as little loss of time as possible. As it was, it was already past nine o'clock when he came to the clearing.

'Oh damn! Damn the bloody elephant god!' Henry cursed aloud

The elephant had already come and gone, and he had once again attacked Henry's jacket hanging on the bamboo. The sight of his tattered jacket brought on a prickly feeling in his scalp. It was uncanny— it was almost as though the elephant too was searching him out, challenging him, all the while getting inexorably nearer.

Henry sat down on the dead tree, and cursed his luck. If he had been just an hour earlier, he might have come upon the elephant while it was still busy with his jacket. By now it would have been all over.

He imagined himself taking the shot, standing behind the great fallen tree, secure as a fortress, and firing at the elephant as it was bending over the jacket, killing it cleanly and at leisure and enjoying the process, hitting it in the hollow between the eyes and the ear again and again. . . .

And now he would have to venture into that impenetrable jungle, a jungle in which he would be working almost blind-fold,

clumsily tearing through the thorns, a jungle where the elephant god was waiting for him, rocking its great body from side to side, wriggling its trunk to catch the hated man-scent.

Henry felt almost paralysed with fear, unable to move his limbs.

He stretched out on the broad, double-bed sized trunk of the fallen tree, his mind refusing to come to grips with reality; all he wanted to do was to lie back and do nothing, nothing at all.

He shook his head and sat up with a jerk. He was not going to walk into a trap; he was not going blindly into the elephant's own chosen killing ground, offering himself to be broken up like a reed by a single lash of the trunk.

'I must exercise all possible caution,' he said to himself, feeling all the while that a year earlier he would not have held back at this stage. 'I will not be caught in the elephant's trap,' he resolved, knowing deep within himself that he was only giving in to fear. 'I shall not do what a hunter, crafty and wise to the ways of the jungle, would not do,' he said to himself, knowing that he was only finding excuses to avoid what he should be doing.

He felt limp and hungry, as though he had not eaten a square meal for days; he felt sleepy; his whole body was sweating in spite of the cool morning air and his heart thumped like a hammer; there was again that prickly feeling at the back of his head and he had to fight down a tendency to yawn and gasp for breath, and his limbs ached.

If there was a day on which a hunter should not venture to go after a killer-elephant in a matted jungle of reeds and thorn, it was certainly this day, when he felt tired and sleepless, when his mental and physical capacities were at their lowest. He told himself, and he knew he was right.

He almost laughed with relief. It was good to be right; it was good to be doing something for the right reason instead of for a thousand wrong reasons.

And with that thought Henry Winton stretched back again on the dead tree, pillowing his head on the leather jacket battered by the elephant and smelling of grass and earth, and within a few minutes fell into a deep sleep.

The sun was directly overhead when he woke up. He looked at his watch. It was just past twelve; he must have been asleep for nearly three hours. He felt rested but still limp and drowsy and his clothes hung damp from his sweat. He put his water-bottle to his

mouth and drank, and the water tasted foul and warm. He ate his sandwiches, realizing that this was the first solid food he had eaten in twenty-four hours. He ate hungrily, picking up the very last crumb from the paper.

By the time he had finished his sandwiches, he had made his plans. He would set up his jacket as a scarecrow again and go home early and get some sleep. To-morrow morning, he would come here at dawn and wait for the one-tusker to arrive. He would take up his position on top of the fallen tree just where he was sitting now, having set up his scarecrow so that he would get an unrestricted field of fire. He would shoot smoothly and cleanly, without jerking or flinching, and he would kill the one-tusker. It couldn't have been easier; almost as safe as shooting it from the verandah of the game cottage. That was the way to shoot a rogue-elephant, on the hunter's own ground, not the elephant's; it couldn't be simpler, it couldn't be safer.

To-morrow then was the day; but if the elephant did not appear in the clearing to-morrow, there were more to-morrows, exactly nine of them, Henry reminded himself, counting until the end of the month.

He was going to make a neat job of the scarecrow this time; put up a proper, upright figure made to look like a hunter. He hacked out a bamboo pole, with his kukri and pulled a length of kumbia bark. He tied two stout cross-arms to the bamboo pole and planted it on his chosen spot, exactly thirty paces away from the fallen tree and clear of all obstruction. He draped his jacket on the sticks and stuffed it with grass. He made a head by tying the grease-proof paper in which his sandwiches had been packed round a sheaf of grass. For good measure, he placed his Gurkha hat on the head at a rakish angle.

He blew a kiss at the scarecrow and turned for home and rest and sleep. It was still only twenty minutes to two. He walked with a light step, knowing that he had found the answer, knowing that he had won.

Here, at last, was the heady, arrogant awareness of being master of the situation. It was the same feeling he had known on the day of the strike at Silent Hill. Then he had known he would break the strike, break it without resorting to extremes; using what he had always prided himself was the very minimum of force administered with the most telling effect, like bringing down an animal

with just one well-placed bullet. And he had broken the strike, by God, he had broken the strike all on his own although Sudden and Arkell between them had drained away the glory from his triumph by going and bribing Jugal Kishore afterwards.

He headed for home, walking with a springy step, supremely confident of success; the fact that he was going to kill the one-tusker was now clearer to him than anything else had ever been in his life. He was going to shoot him from a proper hiding place, getting his shots in before the elephant could be aware of his presence. He had the experience and the skill. He had killed elephants before—three tuskers and a makna, and he had shot them when the conditions were by no means as favourable as they were now. There was no need to go tracking the creature into that ungodly, matted hell of reeds and thorn; now the ground was of his own choosing.

Just before the foot-path from the valley joined the mule-track higher up the slope, it passed between two magnificent deodar trees standing close together and making a narrow, absurdly high archway. When Henry came within sight of it he stopped. Standing in the middle of the archway, blocking his path, was a woman in a yellow sari.

It was Gauri.

'What do you want?' asked Henry.

Gauri threw back her head and laughed. The sound of her staccato laughter made a weird gash in the afternoon silence of the forest. The laughter stopped abruptly, on the same pitch as it had started.

'Get out of my way' ordered Henry.

'Come and push me! Come and push me if you dare' challenged Gauri.

'If you don't get out of the way, I shall just have to push you . . . What's your game?'

'You're so brave, aren't you, Winton sahib, when you're dealing with women and little boys. Indian women and Indian boys! What happens to your courage when you meet your own kind—your own women? You are quite powerless before them, like a scorpion before a lizard.'

'What do you want?'

'Do you remember I once told you I would kill you?—that time you hit me in the face in front of all your coolies?'

'Is that what you have in mind?—to kill me?'

'No, I am not going to kill you, Henry Winton. There are others who have sworn to do that. I want to do something to you which will make you wish I had killed you—something far worse than death itself.'

'Stop raving, you black harlot! I'll . . .'

His words were drowned in the sound of her shrieking, hysterical laughter, short and abrupt, without beginning or end.

He came up to her menacingly, his rifle clutched tightly in his left hand, his right fist clenched, his face red with anger.

'Yes that's all you can do hit a woman. That's all you Englishmen are capable of—hitting women, when they are themselves being hit by the Germans and their own womenfolk! Then they come here and take it out on the Indians. Indian women and children—and think how very brave they are!'

Henry stopped within hitting distance of her. Was she concealing a knife or something? He would have to jump back if she suddenly lashed out.

'Why have you stopped, Winton? Not afraid, are you?'

'What do you want?' asked Henry again.

'I want you to come with me.'

'Where?'

'Wherever I choose to take you.'

'And if I refuse?'

'Then I shall know that you really are frightened of me. You have refused to see me once already, told your sepoy to send me away. You can't hide behind a sepoy now. What are you frightened of? You have your gun with you, your big elephant gun.'

'You're mad.'

'I am not mad, not now. But I was mad. That was when you hit me—then I wanted to kill you. Now I don't want to kill you, not any more, knowing that you are already as good as dead—worse than dead. Knowing that a fate far worse than death awaits you.'

'I cannot go with you.'

'How long can you go on putting it off? You cannot put off fate, Mr. Winton. You refused to see me that day when I came to see you at your office. Now you are too frightened to come and see—see what you are fated to see.'

'How far do you want me to go?'

'Only ten minutes walk from here.'

'Come on, then,' said Henry.

They walked in silence, Gauri leading the way, walking faster and faster, beckoning to him every now and then with her hand; Henry found it difficult to keep pace with her. After going along the mule-path for a while, she suddenly turned left and began to climb the hill.

'Are you going up Wallach's Folly?'

'Yes. Hurry; hurry!'

What did she want? Did she mean to push him over the edge? But there was no possibility of his being killed by such a minor fall—barely fifteen feet. Gauri must know that. Was there someone else waiting for them on the hill-top? Henry found himself in the grip of an inner compulsion to find out.

Gauri went scrambling up the steps, and he followed her clumsily, panting as he went up, nursing his rifle and his binoculars. She went over to the opposite edge and began peering down the hill-side to their right, and he stood cautiously back, keeping away from the edge, wondering what she could be up to.

'There,' she said, clutching his arm. 'Look!'

He flung away her hand, recoiling as though touched by something unclean, but his eyes followed her pointing finger. Then he saw it: Eddie Trevor's motor-cycle leaning at an awkward angle on the slope of the hill.

'The motor-cycle?'

'No; no! You fool, you——!' she hissed, spitting out an obscene Hindustani word. 'Higher up, to the left of the motor-cycle, under the thick black tree . . . just in line with the edge of the cliff. See?'

Yes, he saw; and his eyes refused to believe what they saw. He pulled out his binoculars and looked.

Eddie Trevor and his wife were lying side by side on a small blue rug spread under the branches of a tree. They were lying as though they had been there for a long time. As Henry watched, Jean rose to her elbows, shook her gold hair, and laughed. Then she leaned over Eddie Trevor and covered his face with hers. Eddie flung an arm round her, caressing her back; with his other hand he caressed her head.

'Now you have seen?' asked Gauri, and her voice was low.

He did not say anything.

'It was here they used to come, to Wallach's Folly. That day when I had come to see you in your office, they were here, and the dog was barking because he could not climb the steps. But you did not come, and did not want to see what your wife was doing behind your back because you were afraid to know the truth. You, the white scorpion, frightened of the white, pink-bellied lizard, your wife! You can hit a woman like me, and you can hit small boys; never hit a woman like your wife. Nor a man like Eddie Trevor; he would break you like a twig!'

'Shut up, shut up, shut up! You dirty-minded black sow! exclaimed Henry.

'Yes, go on abusing me. That's all you can do. Abuse and hit the Indians and their women, because you are impotent to punish a man who is taking your wife right before your eyes, and every coolie on the garden knows it. Look! Look! If I am dirty-minded, take a good look at that clean white wife of yours!'

Henry put up his binoculars again. He could not bear to see what he saw, and yet he went on looking, as though spell-bound; just as he had gone on looking at the elephant trampling down Kistulal.

And what he saw now was far more horrible than the death scene of his shikari.

Something in his brain was going to explode, some nerve, deep inside his head, which had begun throbbing in an insane rhythm of its own: what kind of pain was it going to bring, he found himself thinking, paralysis?—death?

Without being conscious of it, he had brought the rifle to his shoulder. Over the sights, he looked at his wife and her lover, calculating the distance. He had never fired the four-sixty-five at that range. What was it, four hundred yards? He would have to allow at least two feet for the bullet to drop; and then would it hit him or her, or both?

Gauri's harsh, incessant chatter was tugging away at his consciousness. A strong wind was blowing past his head, drying up the beads of sweat as they formed. He felt a sudden, nervous shiver run down his body, and the sight of the rifle begun to wobble. It was not the right kind of weapon, Henry thought. With the Mauser, he could have picked off Trevor clean even at that range. Almost against his will, he brought the rifle down. For a moment, the long-

ing for his accurate, high-velocity 265 Mauser dominated his thoughts, and as though he was confronted with a problem in marksmanship, he found himself working out the allowances for wind and distance. Yes he could do it, if only he had his Mauser handy. . . .

That's the punishment God has given you, the elephant god whom you are seeking to kill!" Gauri's words came whipping through his hypnosis 'Your wife will have half-black, quarter-black sons, and you will proudly claim them as your own . . . and she will go on cheating you and cheating you, with Trevor whom you detest and with anyone else she can find. . . .'

Henry turned upon her in a blind rage and brought the back of his hand crashing against her mouth with a resounding smack, feeling the sting of her teeth against his own knuckles as the skin broke. But all she did was to throw her head back and laugh, laugh with the drops of blood spurting out of lips in a thin red line, and this time her laughter went spiralling higher and higher, cutting like a knife into the dead silence of Wallach's Folly

'Stop it, stop it! Stop it!' he roared, and lunged viciously at her again, but this time she side-stepped to avoid the blow. He missed his balance and came staggering to the edge of the cliff, flinging out his arms wildly and grabbing at nothingness. And then he went slithering down the rock face of Wallach's Folly

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'This is London Calling!'

HE felt shaken and bruised, and there was a long red and blue welt on his left forearm, but what he did not like was the numbness in his right ankle. He was trying to get up and stand but was unable to do so when Gauri came up to him, carrying his rifle.

'Are you hurt?' she asked. 'Have you broken something?'

'Get out of my way!' he ordered.

She saw his binoculars lying a few feet away and brought them to him. Both the glasses were cracked.

'Damn!' said Henry.

'Can you get up?' she asked.

He ignored her and tried to raise himself to his feet. Halfway through, he gave up the attempt and fell back with a groan. His body had broken into a cold sweat.

'Blast! I've twisted my ankle.'

'Try and stand up. Try and walk on it,' said Gauri, pulling him up.

He had to put his full weight on her before he could stand up but as soon as she released her hold he again crumpled to the ground.

The sweating was quite bad now, and his limbs shook. He mutely put out his hands again and she pulled him to his feet.

'Lean on my shoulder,' said Gauri. 'Let me see if I can carry you.'

'Oh, no!' he said, recoiling. 'I can't!'

'I'm used to carrying heavy loads,' she returned. 'Remember the sack of tea leaf? That's better. See if you can manage to take a step now.'

He gritted his teeth, took a hesitating step forward, and then another, but he could manage to put one foot in front of the other only when she bore most of his weight on her shoulder.

And that was how he reached home that afternoon, nearly an hour later, leaning heavily on Gauri's shoulders. At the gate of the bungalow she stopped and told him to call out to his own servants.

Leaning his weight against the gate-post, Henry yelled for the number-one boy, and soon his servants came rushing down the drive. He turned to speak to Gauri, but she had already slipped away.

'Thank you,' he said to the emptiness behind him.

Jean too had come running. She was wearing the same clothes Henry had already seen her in, and her face was white with anxiety.

'It's just a bruise; nothing to worry about,' he assured her, and his voice to himself sounded perfectly natural.

She sent one of the servants to bring a chair, and on it the servants carried him into the bungalow. His right ankle had swollen enormously, and the number one boy had to cut his boot before he could ease his foot out of it.

'Send for Rao, the dresser,' said Henry to the boy.

'Shouldn't we telegraph for Dr. Lewis?' asked Jean.

'Doctor? No. Just send for the dresser. Boy! Bring me a drink. Whisky.'

The boy brought a bottle of John Haig and poured out a drink.

'Leave the bottle,' said Henry, 'just leave it there on the table.'

'Is the pain very bad?' asked Jean.

The pain was a dull, incessant throb. Henry gulped his whisky down and put the glass down on the table before he spoke.

'Pain? No. Hardly any pain. It's just a sprained ankle.'

'It looks pretty bad; I hope you haven't gone and broken a bone or something.'

'What was that? No bloody fear!' he snapped at her in sudden irritation. 'Dammit!—it won't do any good to go acquiring a game leg, what? Not at this stage.'

What was she trying to insinuate—the damned virgin-faced, pink-bellied she-lizard? Suggesting that he might have broken a bone. Did she imagine he was making it out to be worse than it was?

And out of nowhere, Cockburn's words came back to him with startling vividness, drunken and heavily slurred, 'Try and acquire a game leg now, so that when the time comes you won't have to go!'

He looked at her face, but could read no signs of guilt. She looked pale, and the lines between her eyes had deepened, but she did not look the least bit nervous. What was she thinking about?—sitting

by his chair looking dutifully worried and anxious and so utterly innocent. What was going on behind those azure-blue English eyes?

Rao, the dressing assistant from the first-aid station, came waddling in, a short and dumpy coal-black south Indian wearing a trim, snow-white turban. He was smiling and bowing and feeling important, for this was the first time he had been called to the manager's house.

Henry winced as the cold, pudgy fingers of the Indian probed his throbbing ankle. Was it the sudden stab of pain or was it the black man's touch on his bare white leg, the soft, clammy fingers like black Portuguese sausages, pressing gently to locate the centre of the pain, that had made him jerk his foot back with a curse?

'Never mind the bloody diagnosis!' he snapped at the dressing assistant. 'Just get on with the treatment.'

The dressing assistant shrank visibly and his chatter stopped. He worked in sullen silence, daubing layers of iodine on the ankle and tying an elastic bandage round it. When he was finished, he stood up and salaamed, waiting for Henry's permission to go.

'That should settle it,' said Henry. 'Don't you think?'

'I don't know, saar. If there is no more swelling to-night, it will be all right within a week. Otherwise it may take much longer.'

'There is not going to be any further swelling to-night—or any other night,' said Henry. 'And it's not going to take more than a few days, a week at the most. You may go now. Give me a drink, boy! A proper drink—damn you!'

The dresser folded his hands and went waddling out, and as soon as he had reached his quarters he must have told everyone about Henry's accident. Within half an hour, a deputation of the senior supervisors and other officials came to make inquiries. And Henry received them sitting in an armchair in the verandah and spoke a few words to each of them while Jean sat next to him saying nothing.

It was just as the supervisors had gone away that the number one boy came and told him that Eddie Trevor was waiting to see him.

It was all he could do to avoid looking at Jean. I must keep cool, Henry reminded himself. What could Trevor be wanting to see him about? Did he want to confess?—to put himself at his mercy? or did they both mean to brazen it out and tell him that they were in love with each other?

Or had Trevor just come to see how badly Henry had injured himself?

'You'll be wanting to hear the six-thirty news, won't you?' said Jean, rising from her chair.

'It's not six-thirty yet,' he pointed out. 'Don't you want to see Trevor? Show Trevor sahib in, boy, and bring out an extra chair,' he told the boy.

Eddie Trevor came in, buoyant, poised, relaxed, and smiling. 'Good evening, sir,' he said to Henry; 'Good evening, Jean,' to her and took the chair placed for him by the boy.

'No use offering you a drink?' said Henry.

'No, thank you.'

'Or a cigarette?'

'No, thank you,' Trevor said, and laughed, flashing his strong, even teeth. 'They'll want me to play hockey for the army now.'

'Come to think of it, I haven't been smoking myself for the whole of last week—since I started going after the elephant. But I seem to be drinking more than ever.'

'I'll go and put on the news,' said Jean. She got up and went into the sitting room without once looking at Eddie Trevor.

Was she going in because she wanted to leave them to themselves so that they could talk things over?—trying to make it easier for Trevor to tell him that he was in love with his wife? Suspicions went racing through his mind, one after the other. He took a quick look at Trevor's face, trying to read some sign of nervousness, but found nothing save the usual bland, boyish look of innocence, the eager half-smile ready to break out at the slightest encouragement.

'Boy!' Henry called. 'Drink!'

'How did it happen, sir?' Trevor was asking.

'What? Oh, just slipped down the khud. Smashed my Ross binoculars. Damned shame!'

'I hope you haven't . . . haven't broken anything.'

'No, no; it's just a sprain. No question of acquiring a game leg at this time—no bloody fear.'

'We were all sure you were going to get that elephant, the way . . . the way you were going out for him every day, from morning till night.'

That was right, every day from morning till night. Every day. Leaving the coast absolutely clear. What was he trying to get at?—the adulterous half-caste. It would queer their pitch all right if

he had to stay put in his bungalow from now on, not going out. Or would it? Was that why he had come? To arrange some other way of meeting her?

There was a blare of music from the radio in the next room followed by the chimes of Big Ben. 'This is London calling,' the sincere, cultivated voice of Stuart Hibberd announced. 'Here is the news.' The six-thirty news had begun.

'Had you managed to locate the elephant?' Trevor was asking.

'I was going to kill him to-morrow,' said Henry very coldly.

'To-morrow?'

'Exactly between seven and seven-thirty in the morning.'

'Really?'

'Nearer seven than seven-thirty. I have got him used to coming to a particular spot at sunrise every morning; regular as clockwork and at a place chosen by me, so that it would have been a fairly simple matter to kill him. There is an enormous fallen tree for shelter. I was going to bump him off at sunrise to-morrow, at thirty yards range.'

'All measured too!' remarked Trevor, visibly impressed. 'By Jove! Is the tree . . . er, absolutely safe?'

'Safe to fire at an elephant from; not if you missed your shots. It would give you concealment, something to hide yourself behind so that you saw him before he could see you, so that you could get your shots in before he knew you were there. But that was all anyone could want. I could have fired a dozen shots into him before he could reach me.'

'Oh, what a pity!' said Trevor. 'And now you'll have to wait till your leg is all right; maybe a couple of weeks before you can tackle him.'

Henry shook his head. 'It won't be all that simple. This is a wandering elephant. A chance like this may never come again. It is . . . it is something like a tiger who has taken a kill, and is being kept fed with more bait buffaloes till the hunter is ready. It was absolutely foolproof. All I had to do was to wait. It's taken a whole week to work out, a whole week of going out from morning to sunset,' and he stared defiantly into Trevor's eyes. 'From dawn till sunset,' he repeated.

Was there a new glint in those wide black eyes with the heavy, Indian lashes? Henry wondered. If so, what did it mean?

'What rotten luck,' Trevor sympathized.

'Bloody rotten luck,' Henry agreed. 'Damnable!' His head was feeling strangely light, and the shooting pain in his ankle had disappeared almost completely. Now there was just a dull, all-over numbness. The whisky was doing him good.

Trevor gave a nervous laugh. 'I was actually going to ask you if you would mind if I went after the elephant for the next few days. . . .'

What was he saying, the grinning, half-black bastard? was he actually offering to take on the one-tusker?

'I mean, only till your leg is all right. I was wondering if I could not take over. But of course I hadn't realized how neatly you had organized it all. Now I feel it would really not be fair to ask you to let me go and kill the rogue. . . .'

Oh, no; of course not! So you feel it would not be fair to take away my elephant; you don't think anything, anything at all, about taking my wife. You have such a delightfully refined sense of values, Mr. Eddie Trevor.

The mellifluous voice of Stuart Hibberd was telling an anxious world something about aircraft production and the changes of military command and about the US Government being concerned over the violation of American territorial waters. . . . according to a Washington announcement, the United States Government has appointed a committee of investigation under the chairmanship . . . ' Hibberd was saying.

Henry was not interested in aircraft production or the concern of the US Government over the violation of territorial waters. He was trying hard to concentrate on what Eddie Trevor was saying. The same nerve in his head which had been throbbing earlier in the day had begun its insane pounding once more. Was he going to faint? While Eddie Trevor was looking on? He gripped his chair hard and shook his head and took a deep breath, trying to regain control of himself.

' . . . and I came, thinking of asking you for the loan of your rifle until your ankle heals, so that . . . '

The throbbing nerve had stopped just as suddenly as it had started, not leaving a black-out as he had feared, but a patch of clear, cold light.

'So you're thinking of going after the one-tusker?' asked Henry. At last his thoughts seemed to be focussing on what Trevor was saying.

'Yes, sir.'

'And you want to borrow my four-sixty-five?'

'That was what I had in mind.'

'And cartridges too, you said.'

'Yes, sir. But when I came here, I didn't know you had . . . you had nearly got the elephant on a plate. For me to go and shoot him now would be hardly fair.'

'Boy!' shouted Henry. 'Boy! Give me a drink, whisky; jaldi!'

The boy came and poured out a drink and opened a fresh bottle of soda and topped the glass with it. Henry picked up the drink and tossed it down in one long draught. 'Bring my walking stick,' he ordered.

The boy brought the thick, rubber-tipped Malacca cane and handed it to Henry, and Henry dismissed him with a nod.

'So you were thinking of going after the elephant?' Henry asked again.

'Yes, sir; if you have no objection.'

'Objection! Lord, no! It's not my private elephant.' Henry drew in his breath and added, 'And you wanted my rifle and cartridges?'

'Yes, Mr. Winton.'

Henry peered at Eddie Trevor with a new interest, sitting on the green painted chair and leaning forward in his eagerness; his black hair falling over one eye in a thick wave, his wide, innocent eyes shining brightly; and a trick of light made his figure go smaller and smaller until he became just a minute, black-topped khaki speck in the distance, puny and insignificant, like an ant or a beetle, to be crushed at will.

To be crushed at will!

Henry put back his head and laughed.

'It is a damned dangerous business,' he said. 'Perhaps more dangerous than you realize.'

'Not with the four-sixty-five in one's hands, and if one can see him clearly. Can one?'

'Oh, yes; very clearly. Look, if you really do want to go, I wouldn't mind letting you have my rifle and telling you exactly where he is going to be.'

'Oh, Mr. Winton! I shall be most grateful. Yes, I really do want to go; if you have no objection, that is. It will be a hell of a thing

to have shot a rogue-elephant everyone is talking about; a feather in my cap, just before I go away.'

'I'll bring out the bandook then,' said Henry, and rose to his feet, leaning his weight heavily on his stick.

'Be careful, Mr. Winton! Couldn't the boy bring out the rifle and cartridges?'

Henry stood rocking to and fro in front of his chair. He gave Trevor a broad wink and laughed. 'A man's ammunition cupboard, Eddie, is a terribly personal thing. No one should be permitted to have access to it. If they mix up the cartridges, there are bound to be accidents.'

'Can't I help, please?'

'No, thank you, Eddie; I shall manage,' Henry assured him, feeling light and jovial, suddenly happy; at peace with himself and the world. The cards were falling just right, at last. It was going to be easy, too easy, he kept telling himself as he went shuffling across the verandah into the gun-room, holding on to the walls and furniture and leaning on his cane. In a few moments, he was back, carrying his big elephant gun and a box of cartridges.

Trevor took the four-sixty-five from his hands, almost with reverence, his eyes shining. 'Oh, what a beautiful thing! So this is the rifle Pasupati had told me was no good—the fool.'

'What's that? Oh, that boy! He's not all there. Here are the cartridges. There are sixteen in that box. Enough?'

'Enough for half a dozen elephants at least, I should think,' said Trevor confidently. 'Thanks; thanks ever so much.'

'Well, I'm afraid it will just have to be enough. Can't get cartridges any more, in wartin. Got to be terribly careful with whatever one has.'

'Oh, I won't waste even one; you can be sure of that, Mr. Winton. Now please tell me where this spc^r is and all that.'

'Yes, of course, Eddie, of course. I'll draw a sketch for you. . . . Just one thing. I don't think it would do to take a shikari or anyone. I mean . . .'

'Oh, of course not!' Trevor assured him. 'I want to do this on my own.'

'That would be the only way,' said Henry, and began to make the sketch.

The BBC news had just finished when Trevor rose to go. 'Commentary after the news will follow in thirty seconds from now,' said

the announcer, and a blare of loud martial music came on to fill the interval.

Henry called out to his wife, 'Jean! What are you doing inside? Eddie's waiting to say good night. Aren't you coming out?'

But Jean did not come out. Henry Winton shook Eddie's hand warmly and said, 'Good luck, Eddie; excuse my not getting up again.'

33

Two Minutes in the Gun-room

It had been too easy.

No murder could have been easier; no murder more foolproof. The elephant god had obliged; the victim himself had no doubt assisted considerably by sitting up fully exposed right on top of the fallen tree; the faulty cartridges had done their part of the work.

The murderer was lying in bed, nursing a twisted ankle and reading the magazine *Men Only*, at least five miles away from the scene of the crime.

Of course, no one would ever know precisely what had happened in the opening where the hill path joined the Koyna valley, but it was not difficult to guess. Eddie had gone after the elephant, and he was ready and waiting on the dry, fallen tree at first light. The elephant god had come, just as scheduled, and had headed for the scarecrow Henry had put up. And it was when he was busy with Henry's jacket that Eddie must have brought up the rifle to his shoulder and tried to take his shot.

Henry could picture the scene with perfect clarity: knowing exactly where everything was in the clearing; knowing what had happened before, at Lamlung.

The moment the elephant had caught Eddie Trevor's scent, it would have stood stock-still, stopping in mid-stride. Then it must have wriggled the end of its trunk, raising it in the air ever so delicately to make sure where the man-scent was coming from. It must have turned then, turned with that spell-binding deliberation of elephants, carefully centring its eyes on the source of the scent, aiming its whole body at the object to be destroyed—the puny, terrified, gesticulating object perched on a fallen tree that was Eddie Trevor, Olympic hockey star. Henry wondered if Eddie himself had realized that his death had been planned. Perhaps he had, just a second or two before he died, when the rifle had failed to go off, and Pasupati's warning had come to his mind.

Henry hoped that he had realized that he was being murdered.

Eddie Trevor's father, old John Trevor, had come to the bungalow just as they were sitting down to dinner, but Henry had kept him waiting until they had finished. He had gone through clear soup two helpings of creamed chicken, trifle, and an egg savoury, trying to sound natural, trying to behave as though nothing had happened, making small talk to his wife. It would have been unusual to have got excited over a hunter's being a little late coming back. To show too much interest, to break the routine sufficiently to see old Mr. Trevor while they were still at dinner might in itself have aroused some kind of suspicion.

Above all, there was the extra dividend of the intense, exquisite pleasure of glancing repeatedly at his wife's face, gone suddenly chalk white and alert at hearing that Eddie had not returned and that his father had come to see them about it, the pleasure of demonstrating to her, with deeds more than words, that as far as he was concerned, whether a man like Eddie Trevor was late returning from a hunt or never returned, was not sufficient reason to break the ritual of an Englishman's dinner.

He dawdled over his coffee, finding fault with the first cup and sending for another. It was only after he had finished the coffee that he sent for old Mr. Trevor.

John G. Trevor came in, holding his thick, battered, quilted topie in his hands and blinking his eyes, bowing to both of them again and again. He looked diminutive and shrivelled, and his eyes had a wild, staring look. He had also developed a nervous twitch at the corner of his mouth.

'Please sit down, Mr. Trevor,' said Jean, not looking at Henry, but the old man remained standing, twirling his hat and looking at Henry for confirmation. Henry did not invite him to sit down.

'No use getting worked up about someone who has gone out hunting and not come back in time,' Henry told him. 'I'm sure your son will be back soon - may be he is already back for all you know. There are a hundred reasons why a hunter could get delayed. Anyway, I cannot do anything now, at night I'll send out a couple of men to look for him first thing to-morrow morning, that is, if he hasn't turned up by then.'

Old Mr. Trevor had gone on standing, twirling his hat and blinking, and Henry remembered the first day he had seen him, going brazenly into Sudden's sitting-room and helping himself to Sudden's Coronas, the quick-moving, waddling figure full of

assurance, looking into the hat-stand mirror and adjusting the points of his moustaches; the cocky little bastard, father of Eddie Trevor. Henry looked at him with contempt.

'You have my permission to leave, Trevor,' said Henry.

Old Mr. Trevor said 'Good-night' and turned away, hat in hand and shuffling his feet. At the door, he turned once again to bow and say, 'Good night, your honours.'

'It's extraordinary how these types get panicky about nothing at all,' said Henry to his wife loudly enough for Trevor to hear. 'Absolutely no guts!'

It was later that night, when Henry was sitting in front of the drawing-room fire, his swollen leg still swathed in its heavy crepe bandage and resting on a pile of cushions placed on a low stool opposite him as he was drinking brandy that Jean told him she was in love with Eddie Trevor.

Henry listened to her without saying a word, not giving away his hand, knowing that he had already won, and holding on tightly to his secret; preventing himself from blurting out that she was confessing to adultery with a man who was no longer alive. He had gone on staring into the fire, letting her talk, letting her tell him everything; everything that he already knew. Only, it was now being called love. It did not hurt him and, strangely enough, it did not even make him feel angry. He sat listening to her, sipping his brandy and staring into the flames with an air of extreme concentration, listening to how they had been attracted to each other when they had first met two years earlier, how they had now fallen in love, how they had been meeting each other. They wanted to get married, she told him; she would go and live with her aunt and join the WAACs. As soon as she was free to marry, they were going to be married. She also told him how sorry she was, how much it hurt her to cause him the slightest pain.

But she was not causing him any pain. Nothing could hurt him any more, he thought, nothing. All the punishment that his system was capable of absorbing had already come; anything more was like water over the dam.

Right over the mantelpiece was the enormous head of a bison Henry had shot almost five years ago; it was Henry's first bison. That bison too must have been dazed by the first couple of shots, and after that, nothing seemed to have been able to hurt it. It had

taken Henry thirteen more shots to finish the animal off the next morning. The bison had kept trying to get to its knees again and again, even though Henry had been firing shots into its neck from barely six feet away.

Henry shifted his gaze from the flames to the monstrous black head sticking out of its wooden shield, the glass eyes staring dully at nothing, the pink, waxed tongue curling round the grey shellacked nose.

'Have you nothing to say?' Jean was asking him in a flat, husky voice.

He shook his head ever so slightly and went on staring at the bison, his very first bison, the noble head with the magnificent forty-one inch spread, unconscious of the least pain in his mind or body, only vaguely aware of the fact that his wife sitting behind him had begun to sob bitterly.

The two men had gone early the next morning, briefed by Henry and warned by him again and again not to venture into the clearing until they had made sure that the elephant was not there.

Henry sent back his breakfast untouched and waited for their return, smoking cigarette after cigarette, growing increasingly nervous and irritable, and thankful above all that Jean had not come out of the bedroom that morning. That Eddie Trevor was already dead, he did not have the least doubt in his mind. His anxiety was due to quite a different reason. He was waiting for the two coolies with desperate eagerness, knowing that he would have at the most two or three minutes in which to act; to ensure that there would be no possibility of anyone's even suspecting that Eddie Trevor's death had been anything but an accident.

He had gone carefully over what he had to do, but, of course, much would depend on how many cartridges had been used. He had worked out a plan for every possible contingency, and now there was nothing he could do but wait.

It was nearly ten before the two men returned with the news that Eddie Trevor was dead: killed by the elephant - one arm torn clean away from the body and missing, the body itself trampled and broken and gored. They had left the body where it lay, but they had brought back Henry's rifle and also Eddie's cap and canvas cartridge bag which had been lying some distance away from the body.

Henry's heart gave a wild leap. 'Please, God!' he kept saying, 'please, please let this bit work out all right; please.' He snatched at the rifle and the bag, feeling the weight of the bag to ascertain whether the remaining cartridges were still there. He almost ran into the gun-room, thumping his bandaged foot clumsily and gritting his teeth against the blinding pain that each step brought on. He banged the gun-room door shut and broke the rifle and the two unexploded cartridges made two precise arcs and fell in the rug with a single soft thud. He picked up the cartridges from the floor and threw them into the cupboard and loaded two fresh ones into the rifle. He said a silent prayer as he counted the cartridges in the bag itself. All fourteen of them were still there. So Eddie Trevor had not opened the rifle at all, and had dropped no cartridges in the jungle. He counted all the cartridges once again, and then deposited them in the cupboard, and put fourteen fresh cartridges into the bag.

He could not have been away for more than two minutes at the most, but he was sweating in every pore and panting heavily as he came out onto the verandah again. The two coolies were still sitting on the verandah steps exactly where he had left them and talking to each other in hushed whispers.

The cards were falling just right, no missing cartridges this time to give rise to any suspicions, no dud cartridges in the rifle either.

'Thank you, O, God, thank you!' said Henry almost audibly. He had won; it had been too easy.

'Trevor sahib does not seem to have attempted to fire the rifle at all,' he told the two coolies, breaking open the rifle before them. 'Cartridges still intact, see?'

Both the coolies nodded their heads uncomprehendingly, like bulls warding off flies, and Henry snapped at them in a sudden release from tension, 'But have both of you been bitten by mad dogs that you should be bringing the rifle and the hat back here? Don't you know that this is a police matter? Everything must be left exactly where it was. Here, you, Birbahadur, you take two more coolies with you, at once, and take all these things back and put them exactly where you found them understand?'

'Jee sahib,' Birbahadur said, nodding his head.

'Don't leave the body until the police arrive. Don't touch anything—anything. But guard the body, see; don't let the vultures and the ants . . . er, do any damage. Both of you should not have

come back. Go off at once, Birbahadur, and tell the superintendent to give you two coolies—ekdum!"

Henry Winton was once again assuming command of the situation, making all the decisions, giving the orders.

'Boy!' he called. 'B O Y ! Come here, juldī!'

The number one boy came running out.

'Send word to Trevor sahib's father to come here,' he said to the boy. 'At once! Send another man to tell the superintendent to send a telegram to the police thana at Tinapur that an accident has occurred. Go and tell the superintendent what you saw, Sham-singh,' he said to the other coolie who was still standing on the verandah steps. 'Tell him exactly what you saw, so that he can make a full report to the police.'

'Yes, sir,' said the boy, and ran out.

'Jee, sahib,' said Shamsingh.

It was only after they had both gone that Henry threw himself down into a chair, knowing that his legs would not have supported him much longer. 'Boy!' he yelled as soon as he had got his breath back. 'Boy! Koi-hai, there? Idhar ao, bloody ekdum!'

The number two houseboy came out and said, 'Jee sahib.'

'Tell the memsahib I want to see her, here. And boy, bring me a drink afterwards; brandy-pani.'

Jean came out and stood in the doorway, her face chalk-white, her eyes swollen as though she had not slept, her nose pink from crying.

'The boy said you wanted to see me,' she said.

Henry turned in his chair to look at her, savouring the sweet joy of revenge, taking his time like a bullfighter poised to make the final thrust at a groggy bull, knowing that he had already won the fight.

'Eddie Trevor is dead,' he told her, making his voice as dispassionate as possible, unconsciously imitating the BBC announcer. 'Killed by the elephant. It seems he didn't fire a shot.'

Jean covered her face with her hands and turned back into the house.

'Boy!' Henry called. 'Boy! Where's that damned brandy-pani? Juldī!'

Once again the bowed, Japanese figure of old John Trevor came trotting up to the bungalow, holding his hat in his hand and

panting, and sat down in the chair next to Henry without invitation. He looked completely dazed and his ever-blinking eyes were wilder than ever.

'Birbahadur told me,' he said to Henry.

'There's no need to tell you how sorry I am,' said Henry.

'These things are in the hands of God.' Mr. Trevor crossed himself.

'I've sent for the police.'

'Why the police?'

'Whenever there's an accident of this sort, it is always necessary for the police to make an investigation. It is the law.'

'I see.'

'In the meantime, there's nothing more we can do.'

'No, nothing.'

'I cannot tell you how sorry I am,' said Henry again.

'We all have to die.'

'I had warned him it was dangerous.'

'No one can help these things, sahib; it is fate. He was fated not to get his com—commission. Only two weeks more and he would have gone.' Mr. Trevor's eyes were filled with tears.

'That's right, just two weeks.'

'He would have become Lieutenant Trevor, or even Captain Trevor, just like any English off—officer,' Mr. Trevor sniffed.

'Yes, he would have got a wartime commission, quite possibly,' said Henry.

'Will you be sending a wire to Sir Jeffrey Dart?'

'A wire to Sir Jeffrey? No, I don't think so. There's no need to worry the Resident Director about an . . . about an accident like this. I shall be putting it in my weekly report, of course.'

'Then I shall have to send word to Sir Jeffrey, so that he can come here.'

'Come here! Sir Jeffrey Dart? Don't be absurd!' said Henry with irritation.

'He would like to be informed.'

'I know how you must feel, Trevor. But we can't go sending telegrams to the Resident Director to come over every time there's a death on one of the gardens; now can we?'

Eddie Trevor's father sat staring into the distance, nodding and mumbling to himself. He blew his nose into a dirty, crumpled handkerchief and wiped his eyes before he spoke.

'But Sir Jeffrey should be here for the funeral, at least.'

'Sir Jeffrey doesn't like funerals; they upset him. He didn't go even when Captain Cockburn died; and Cockburn was senior manager.'

The little man sat up in his chair and put on his ridiculously large hat as though preparing to leave. 'If you are not informing Sir Jeffrey, the responsibility will be entirely yours.'

'I'm sorry, Trevor, but I certainly don't mean to worry Sir Jeffrey.'

'Then I will send the wire myself. Will you kindly let me have a coolie to send to the telegraph office?'

'A coolie, Trevor? Certainly not! Not for sending the Resident Director a telegram that a . . . a stockman has died.'

'Then I shall have to go down to the telegraph office myself—three miles.'

'That's your business.'

Old John Trevor stood swaying near his chair and looked into Henry's face. 'You never liked my . . . You did not like Eddie, did you, Mr. Winton'

'I don't have to like or dislike every watchman or coolie on my garden or stockman.'

'Because Ruby Miranda preferred him to you,' said old Mr. Trevor in a low almost confidential tone

'I know you've had a nasty shock, Trevor, and you cannot be expected to behave normally. Even so, I shall have to ask you to leave.'

'And then your wife, too, she fell in love with Eddie.'

'Will you get out, or must I throw you out?' said Henry, trying to keep his voice under control.

'You have always been jealous of him. That is why you cannot help behaving as though you are glad he is dead.'

'Frankly, I cannot be expected to feel the same kind of sorrow as you, Trevor. I am not the man's father.'

'No, Mr. Winton. But there is such a thing as common human kindness. But that you have never had. Such a pity,' and Mr. Trevor shook his head sadly and blew his nose.

'I do think you should leave now, Trevor. You are old and you have received a shock. I don't like to be rude, but you will just have to leave.'

'Yes, I will go, certainly; I must walk down to the valley now to

send off a telegram since you won't let me have a man. But remember this, Henry Winton . . .'

'Oh, shut your bloody mouth, you drivelling old bastard!' Henry barked out at him, enraged at the use of his first name. 'I have had enough of your bloody nonsense!'

The old man shook with anger, rocking to and fro, his Victorian quilted topee bobbing up and down with the shaking of his head, but his voice was quieter than ever. 'You taunted me just now, Henry Winton, that you were not Eddie's father. Well, let me tell you something. I am not his father either.'

'You are mad!' said Henry.

'I am not mad, Winton. It is you who are mad; mad with joy because an elephant has done your work for you. Mad with joy because of your broken ankle so that you will not have to go and fight in the war. And you humiliate an old man like me only because you are sure that I cannot hit back at you. But that is just what I wanted to tell you. Eddie was the son of someone far more powerful than yourself, someone who can talk to you in your own language; can keep you standing in his presence, can humiliate you. . . .'

'The shock of your son's death has deranged your mind,' said Henry again, very gently. 'Please try and control yourself.'

'Someone who has the power to make you squirm and grovel before him. Eddie's father is Sir Jeffrey Dart!'

'You're crazy!' shouted Henry. 'That's a lie!'

But even as he was shouting the words he knew that it was not a lie. In a flash, a whole series of inconsistencies had explained themselves; it was as though a curtain had been lifted, making a pattern clearer and brighter, bringing out the colours in all their vividness.

Sudden's flashes of good humour when ver Eddie Trevor happened to be about, his efforts to get him a commission, his insistence on Eddie's being taken on in Jugal Kishore's place, and Lady Dart's tantrums at old Trevor's having visited Sudden surreptitiously.

And towering above all was the Purdy; there could be no other explanation for Sudden's letting Eddie have the use of his cherished one-of-a-pair Purdy. Henry's mind rocked with that realization.

So it wasn't Ruby Miranda who had invited Eddie Trevor to Silent Hill; it was Sudden Dart himself who had sent for him.

'Yes, I married Eddie's mother after she was with child,' John Trevor was saying. 'Jeffrey Dart's child. It was during the war, the

last war. He was my manager then, at Pagoda Dale. He made it worth my while, and I married Eddie's mother. She was a lovely woman, the loveliest woman who ever lived; and I loved her, loved her as no man has ever loved a woman. But Sir Jeffrey Dart has been good to me too; me and the boy, both, helping us out whenever he could.'

'Did . . . did Eddie know?'

'No, Eddie didn't know. He died not knowing. I brought him up as my own child, showering all the love and affection I was capable of, sending him to school at Darjeeling, giving him the best education I could afford, doing for him more than any father would have done. And Eddie has always been a good son to me, loving and dutiful. It was only whenever I was in very bad need of help that I appealed to Sir Jeffrey- for instance, when I wanted a job for him.'

'Oh, my God!'

'And Sir Jeffrey loved that boy too, came to love him more and more. He had no other children, and Eddie was a son to be proud of. Good day, Mr Winton.'

34

'Where You and Eddie Left Off'

THE police came in the afternoon, and by nightfall they had completed the formalities. It was nine o'clock before they brought Eddie Trevor's body up the hill. The missing arm was found in the cleft of a silk-cotton tree on the outskirts of the clearing, at least sixty yards away from where the body lay.

Sudden arrived just in time for the funeral the next morning, and with him he had brought Dr. Lewis to take a look at Henry's leg. Old John Trevor had sent for the padre from Tinapur, and they buried Eddie Trevor in a secluded spot in the shadow of Wallach's folly. Many people from Tinapur railway colony came up in hired buses for the funeral. Among them were Mr. and Mrs. Miranda, accompanied by their three sons, and Henderson the station-master. Most of the national papers must have carried the news of Eddie's death in their morning editions, for the afternoon post brought the first batch of scores of telegrams that were to come from sports associations and hockey clubs all over India.

By lunch-time it was all over. Jean had complained of a headache and had not left the bedroom. Sudden and Dr. Lewis had eaten their lunch in silence and listened to Henry telling them about the elephant. As soon as lunch was over, Dr. Lewis examined Henry's leg.

'Looks as though you have ripped a tendon, Winton,' Dr. Lewis pronounced. 'Perhaps a fracture. Can't tell for certain, with all that swelling. Not without an X-ray. Is the pain pretty constant?'

'Yes.'

'Humm. I'll have to take you down to the railway hospital at Tinapur and get an X-ray. Might have to go into a plaster cast.'

'It's just a sprain,' Henry protested. 'Only a bad sprain. Dammit, I can't go down with a broken leg; I want to join up.'

'Let's leave that to the X-ray to decide,' said Dr. Lewis a little tartly. 'Looks pretty bad to me.'

Sudden, who had kept silent while the examination was going on, said, 'Pity about that leg of yours, Henry.'

'Let's hope the X-ray says it's only a sprain, sir.'

'But that won't do as far as I'm concerned—not for what I had in mind,' said Sudden shaking his head wistfully. 'I was hoping you and I could go and take a crack at this elephant, Henry.'

'You and I, sir?'

'That's right; and now it looks as though I shall have to go and do it by myself.'

'You, sir? Go for the one-tusker!' exclaimed Henry.

'Well, the damned animal has never been so close to one before, what?' said Sudden with excessive lightness. 'Hardly three miles from a motor road.'

'It's pretty difficult country.'

'I doubt if you should be permitted to go out after an elephant, Sir Jeffrey,' Dr. Lewis put in. 'Not with your . . . not after what the Calcutta doctors told you. And the three-mile walk up and down the khud would be quite out of the question with that knee of yours.'

'Oh, I'll manage all right,' said Sudden with firmness. 'I'll get them to carry me on a dandy as far as—as far as one can go in a dandy, damn it; possibly right up to that clearing of Henry's. I hope Jean won't mind putting up with me for a few days, Henry.'

'Of course not, s.r. She . . . we'd be delighted.'

'And I should be most grateful for the use of your big rifle and some cartridges, Henry.'

'Certainly, sir,' said Henry. 'But who will go with you? I mean, sit up with you and all that. You must have someone . . . someone who knows the jungle.'

'I've brought a chap with me,' said Sudden. 'That man Pasupati, you know, looks after the game cottage. He knows every bit of the jungle round here, so he tells me, including the Koyna valley. He's promised to get me a shot at the elephant.'

'Pasupati?' said Henry. 'I suppose he does know the jungle all right, but even so . . .'

'And in any case it shouldn't be at all difficult to shoot him now, after all the spadework you've put in. We shall just be taking over from where you and Eddie left off, you know. I propose to set up a couple of scarecrows in that clearing, just as you did, and then sit up for the elephant till he shows up. Easy.'

'I'll go and tell Pasupati to get busy with the bandobast, then,' said Sudden. 'Just tell them to give me your four-sixty-five and a box of cartridges, will you Henry, before Lewis whisks you off to Tinapur?'

'But why do you have to go after the elephant yourself, Sir Jeffrey?' asked Dr. Lewis. 'Why can't it wait until Winton is able to go hunting again? Or why can't one of the other hunters, Bliss or Rutherford, say, go after the elephant?'

'It's very important that I participate in the killing of this elephant,' said Sudden very solemnly, looking straight in front of him. Then, as though he had said more than he wanted to, he turned on his heel and went out of the room.

'The old man's crazy,' said Lewis, shaking his head in disapproval. 'He's got a dicky heart and he's been warned to go pretty slow. And his old knee is stiffer than ever. Anyway, it's his business, and I know he's not the type who takes advice kindly. Come on, you'd better shout for your boys to get your things ready so that we can go and get that X-ray without wasting any more time.'

'Boy!' called Henry. 'Boy!'

'You'd better tell him to pack as though you are . . . you are going away for some time. Just as well. . . .'

'I say,' said Henry. 'I'd just as soon not say anything about my leg to the memsahib, what? Let's wait until we see what the X-ray has to say. Don't you agree?'

'Of course. We can start as soon as you're ready. You'd better not forget to get out the bandook and the cartridges the old man wants.'

The boy came out and stood waiting for Henry's orders, and for a brief moment, just for a few seconds, Henry wondered how he was going to get the boy to bring out the right cartridges. But he was saved the trouble. Sudden Dart came hurrying back into the room looking very apologetic. He said, 'Look, Henry; forget about the rifle, will you? I won't have to bother you, after all. This chap Pasupati is convinced there's some sort of a spell on that rifle of yours. He's just not prepared to go hunting with anyone who takes your four-sixty-five. Absolute nonsense, of course, but I suppose it's just as well to humour these chaps. No use taking a disgruntled shikari with you on a hunt of this sort, what? I've sent for a rifle and ammunition from the Lower Tista. . . . You know how superstitious some of these damned shikaris can be.'

Within an hour, they were in the car, going down to Tinapur for the X-ray. By the time they reached the railway hospital, Henry had developed a slight temperature. Dr. Lewis shook his head and clucked his tongue when he examined the photographs, but he grinned and told Henry there was really nothing to worry about.

'I'm sending you to Calcutta—to the European hospital there. Absolutely the best in India. They'll have you right as rain; right as rain in no time at all,' said Dr. Lewis to Henry with a chilling, professional smile.

35

Glow-worms in a Basket

IT was three weeks before Henry returned to Silent Hill, and when he came back he was still wearing a heavy plaster cast with a steel heel protruding from it.

Many things had happened since he had left. The February course of training for officers had already begun at Belgaum; the one tusked-rogue had been neatly shot by Sudden Dart; and Jean had left him. She had gone away from Silent Hill to live with her aunt at Poona, and although she had not said anything about leaving him in the only letter he had received from her, Henry knew that she would never come back to him. Somehow, he did not mind.

What he did feel distressed about was what the chief surgeon at the European hospital at Calcutta had told him on the day of his discharge. He was a very tall, bald man with a bony face and a large, luminous head, and he looked at the world mournfully down his long, aquiline nose.

'I'm afraid you'll have to nurse that ankle of yours for quite a while. You mustn't . . . Well, mustn't attempt anything athletic . . . No exercise, for a long time.'

'How long do you think it will take to heal completely?' asked Henry.

'Well, I shouldn't like to say, Mr. Winton. We'll have to take an X-ray or two after the cast is removed. Only then shall we be in a position to judge.'

'Oh.'

'Why don't you look at it this way, Mr. Winton,' said the doctor, attempting a smile which made his long face look even more mournful. 'It's really nothing serious; I mean, you won't develop a limp or anything. It's just . . . well, it's just enough to keep you out of this damned war, what?—Something like what we used to call a "blighty" in the last war. Why don't you look at it that way, Mr. Winton?'

'There is, of course, that way of looking at it,' answered Henry.

The head mechanic from the factory had brought his Austin down, and the number one boy was waiting for him on the platform at Tinapur railway station. The boy had brought Herman with him.

'How's the old leg, Mr. Wilson?' Henderson the station-master inquired.

'All right, thank you,' said Henry.

'Fine dog you've got there,' said Henderson. 'Damn fine animal, Mr. Wilson.'

The days went by in a drowsy succession; days of loneliness and ache and vague, unparticularized longings; days of lying in an easy chair all day long with a plaster cast for company and listening to the radio or reading one of the heavy Russian novels of the previous century and going for long drives in the evenings and drinking more whisky than was good for you—while the world round you was slowly but surely coming to grips with a war.

Life became a grey, meaningless blurr, without strife or challenge, without rapture or sorrow, with no discernible patches of light or shade: the elephant god was dead, Eddie Trevor was dead, Jugal Kishore was a tool in Sudden's hands, and Sudden himself was now merely Nero deflated—kind and understanding and even gentle.

Jean had gone, leaving behind no more than a numbness. The humiliation she had made him suffer had been fully avenged; that, at least, was a score paid off with full interest. And if it had left no feeling of triumph, it had left no regrets either.

Ruby Miranda alone stood as a significant landmark in the turbulent pattern. She had not left him as Jean had done. On the contrary, Ruby had left Eddie Trevor for his sake; had offered to forsake her own world for his, asking so little, giving so much. It was he who had spurned her; he who had insulted her love, insulted it and doubted it, assuming that it was Ruby who had suggested that Trevor should come to Silent Hill. Now he knew it was not Ruby Miranda; it had been Sudden Dart.

And Henry now knew within himself that he had renounced her love not because he did not reciprocate it, nor even because it was not the love of a white woman, as Jean had taunted him, but

through fear, because Sudden had warned him not to get involved with her, fear that his career would have ended if he had carried on as he was doing.

That realization left the only major scar on his conscience.

He had not seen Ruby Miranda for nearly two months now, because he had not been to Chinnai, but as the days went by he began to think more and more of her.

Whenever Henry tried to think back to the point in time at which his life might be said to have taken a wrong turning, he always came back to the day of the strike when he had decided to ask Sudden to let him go on leave. And analysing his emotions of that time, he came to the conclusion that while his request to Sudden was partly prompted by his revulsion to all that happened during the strike itself, his chief reason for wanting to go on leave was to get away from Ruby Miranda, get away because he no longer trusted himself not to cross what Sudden had referred to as the thin line that separated fun from serious involvement: he was deliberately preventing himself from falling in love with Ruby.

Now he wished he had given in to his inclinations, not prevented himself from crossing the line, he wished he had fallen in love with her, proposed to her, married her, had children by her. He would have been a happy man to-day, happy and fighting the war --and to hell with the Highlands Club and the memsahibs of Chinnai!

As the time came for the plaster cast to be removed, Henry's mind once again began to be obsessed by Ruby Miranda. But this time his thoughts had little to do with sex. It was a purer, nobler, wholly composed image of Ruby that he carried in his mind, not the eager, wanton mistress lying without clothes on his gun room carpet, bringing out in him sheer, animal lust, but the formally dressed, calm, understanding, dependable woman who had soothed his ruffled nerves with such artistry and tenderness after his clash of words with Jugal Kishore.

And slowly the days once again began to acquire a purpose. As his leg healed, Henry found himself looking forward with increasing eagerness to the day when he would go to Chinnai and see Ruby Miranda: for he had made up his mind to ask her to be his wife.

Life had acquired a dramatic simplicity. His whole future depended on whether she would forgive him for having spurned her love. He was aware that if he wanted to get married again, there

would have to be the formalities of getting a divorce from Jean; but he knew that it could be arranged without much difficulty, if only Ruby would consent to accept him.

Everything depended on her.

On 29 February, Dr. Lewis drove down from Chinnar to break the plaster cast on Henry's leg. It was a Saturday, and he stayed over the week-end to see how the leg had healed.

'You'll have to be very careful with that leg for a time?' he warned Henry. 'You must start exercising it from now on, of course but very gently. Get someone to massage it every day. But don't put much weight on it for a few weeks.'

The leg looked bloodless and shrivelled that first day, but that was due to the plaster, the doctor told him. By the next afternoon Henry was already getting used to the feeling of lightness caused by his not having to carry a cast.

'When do you think it will be all right, I mean heal completely?' Henry asked, that Sunday afternoon while they were having tea.

'It looks fine to me, really good,' Dr. Lewis assured him. 'But I should like to wait until we have taken another X-ray. We'll take the photograph and then send it to Calcutta. Let Dr. Simpson see how the bone has set. But it is important that you should start exercising it; but very gently. So that you gradually come to use it more and more.'

'Yes, of course.'

'I suppose you know we have an X-ray set in Chinnar now? I got Sudden to fork out the money. We can do the photographs the next time you are up. When are you likely to come?'

'Will next week-end be all right?'

'Oh, yes; as far as the leg is concerned,' Dr Lewis assured him. 'Make sure you don't come late. I'd like to do the X-ray in the early afternoon.'

'I'll report to you immediately after lunch,' said Henry.

Over the week, the leg improved rapidly. On Tuesday Henry took a few tottering steps in the verandah, and by Friday he had been able to walk almost naturally with the help of a stick, and the shakiness of his legs had completely gone. But driving a car was still out of the question, and one of the mechanics from the factory had to be called on to take him up to Chinnar.

He left Silent Hill after an early breakfast on Saturday, and

reached the Brindian office just before lunch-time. Sudden was standing with his back to the window, looking at an enormous elephant tusk mounted on a rosewood stand and supported by massive silver plated brackets.

'Come and have a look at the tusk, Henry,' Sudden invited him without looking round. 'Barton's have just sent it up. What do you think?'

'Magnificent, sir.' They've done a wonderful job, they always do. Somehow it didn't seem quite so big on the elephant.'

'Yes, they're deceptive, aren't they? Nearly half the length doesn't show. Which side did you say you had got your shot on, Henry?'

For a moment, Henry's mind went blank. Damn. Which side of the elephant was it that Cockburn and himself had decided he had fired his shots at? But Sudden saved him the embarrassment of trying to think out an answer.

'Must have been on the left side,' said Sudden, still looking intently at the tusk in front of him and stroking it with his hand. 'We couldn't check what damage your bullet had done, last year in Lamlung. He was lying on his left side and we couldn't turn him over to see.'

It was the left,' said Henry.

'I thought so. How's the leg, Henry?'

'Fine, sir.'

'Do you think you'll be up to climbing the ladders into the game cottage?'

'The game cottage? Certainly,' said Henry, unreasonably excited.

'Something's gone wrong with that moon of ours. Doesn't look like a moon any more. The animals just don't seem to trust it. We couldn't show a thing to Jock Maclean when he came up last month. I was wondering if you were fit enough to go up and find out what the matter is.'

'Is anyone special coming, sir?'

'His Excellency the Governor of Assam,' Sudden said with a touch of his old pomposity. 'About the end of this month. Rather late in the season, of course, but you know what Governors are. But if your ankle isn't fully healed . . .'

'It's quite healed, sir; that is I can get up to the cottage all right, taking the steps one by one, with someone to help me. I'm not supposed to jump about on the leg; that's about all.'

'You'd better ask Dr. Lewis before you take it on.'

'I'll ask him, sir. I'm going to see him this afternoon for an X-ray. I'm quite sure he'll have no objection.'

When Henry left, Sudden was still looking intently at the tusk, as though he were examining it for flaws. Throughout the interview he had not once looked at Henry.

The mention of the game cottage had set up a new current of thought in Henry's mind. That was where he had seen Ruby Miranda last, and she had promised to come again. The game cottage in the midst of the jungle, with its air of privacy, its total seclusion, somehow seemed to be the appropriate setting for his reunion with Ruby Miranda.

That was where he would ask her to be his wife.

He went up to the Club for an early lunch, feeling light and gay and excited for the first time in many weeks, and hoping to have a word with Ruby Miranda before lunch started. As it happened, the first person he saw when he entered the dining room was Ruby. She was bending over the cold buffet table, pencil and pad in hand, and making some sort of list and talking to the chief steward. She turned to look at Henry when she heard the tap-tap of his cane on the wooden floor, and then went on with whatever she was doing. It was only when he said, 'I say, Miss Miranda, could I have a word with you?' that she looked back again. She dismissed the chief steward with a curt, 'That will be all, thank you' and came up to Henry's table, smiling. She was wearing her dove grey coat and skirt.

It was a reassuring smile. It told Henry that everything was going to be all right.

'It's certainly nice to see you back, Mr. Winton,' said Ruby.

'It's much nicer to see you, Miss Miranda.'

'It's weeks since you were up.'

'It seems months; ages.'

'You're looking thin, Mr. Winton,' remarked Ruby.

'And you're looking wonderful, Miss Miranda.'

It was certainly good to be talking to a woman again, to a woman like Ruby Miranda, making the sort of talk that could always be construed as a kind of sexual play.

'Will you be staying for some time?' asked Ruby. 'I could give you a nice corner room.'

'Perhaps to-morrow. To-night I have to sleep in the cottage,' said Henry. 'Call of duty; looking after the moon.'

'Moon, Mr. Winton? There's no moon to-night. Amawasya: don't you know, the night of total darkness?'

'I mean the artificial moon. D'you think you could have some cold chicken sent up for my dinner?'

'Yes, of course,' said Ruby. 'Anything else you would like, special, Mr. Winton?'

'Yes, please; lemon tarts.'

'Certainly, Mr. Winton.'

'Dinner for two, please, Miss Miranda,' said Henry, looking directly into her eyes. 'I'm expecting a guest, a very special guest.'

'Yes, of course.'

She was leaning over his table now, and Henry saw with a thrill of delight that she was wearing the sapphire and gold ear-clips he had given her more than a year ago.

'Will you come, please, darling?' he whispered. 'I've something very special to say to you.'

Her face flushed, and she smiled again; and by the way she looked at him, Henry knew that everything was going to be all right.

'Does the keeper know you are going to the game cottage, Mr. Winton?' Ruby asked.

'What? Oh, Pasupati? No, he doesn't.'

'He'll have to. . . . He'll have to prepare the cottage for you if you are spending the night there. . . .'

'I shall certainly be spending the night there.'

'Shall I send him word?'

'Please, Miss Miranda. And could you also send up a bottle of champagne? whatever vintage the Club prides itself upon.'

Ruby's face flushed a deep red once again

'Yes, Mr. Winton,' she said.

Dr. Lewis looked surprised and he had frowned, but did not object to Henry's going up to the game cottage. He had only warned him that he must go up the steps one by one, and be helped at each step.

And Pasupati had done an excellent job. He had taken Henry up carefully, sparing him the slightest exertion, almost lifting his whole weight at every step. But even so, Henry had felt quite done when they reached the top.

The first thing Henry did was to go up to the new porcelain water-filter they had installed as a result of his last inspection, and pour out a glass of water. He noticed that the filter was barely a quarter full.

'Why haven't you filled this up?' he asked Pasupati with irritation. 'You know how hot it is these days.'

'I didn't know sahib was coming. No one comes up nowadays. I shall bring a ghara of water with your dinner and fill up the filter.'

Henry slumped heavily on the wooden bench in the observation verandah. It was a warm day, even hot, and the light was harsh and bright. There was a sharp breeze in the jungle and the grass all about looked parched and brittle. Even the surface of the salt-lick was covered with deep cracks. Henry had never before seen the forest looking so dry.

The sight of Pasupati, thin and bent and breathless, wiping his dripping face with the edge of his shirt, mollified Henry a little.

'Thank you very much for helping me up,' said Henry to him. 'Bahut meherbani. Why don't you have a glass of water from the filter? Don't finish it all, though; I want some with my brandy.'

Pasupati smiled his thanks, but declined the drink of water. 'No, sahib,' he said. 'Sahib will need it all.'

This is quite the first time I have seen the bastard smile, thought Henry. 'Why don't you like me, Pasupati?' he asked.

'Who am I not to like sahib?' said Pasupati very humbly.

'Tell me the truth. Why did you tell the burra-sahib that my big rifle was . . . that there was some kind of jadoo on it?'

Pasupati looked away, peering into the jungle as though he was examining it for signs of game.

'You said that to Trevor sahib, too . . . that you would not go with him if he took my rifle.'

Pasupati made no reply to Henry's question. Instead he asked, 'Burra-laah sahib coming next month?'

It was extraordinary how they always seemed to know who was coming.

'That's right, the Governor, the burra-laah. That's why we're here, to see that the moon behaves all right.'

Pasupati grinned again. 'To-night is amas, no moon,' he said.

It was odd, Henry reflected, that Pasupati should be making the same sort of observation that Ruby had made earlier, about its

being a moonless night. 'Bad night, what?' He laughed. 'Bad night to go out?'

'Very bad, sahib, bad for anything.'

'I see you've been polishing all the woodwork, and the furniture here. Whole place reeks of . . . what is it? paraffin?'

'Whole cottage varnish when General sahib come.'

'You never told me what's wrong with my big rifle,' Henry persisted.

'Big rifle does not fire, sahib.'

'Damned nonsense! It fires beautifully.'

'That is how Trevor sahib die.'

'Look, I know you're still worked up about your father's being killed by the elephant when he went out with me. He was lame, as you know, and could not run away. I was not there when the elephant killed him.'

'All I know is, big rifle does not fire.'

'Who told you?'

'Jugal Kishore babu.'

'Jugal Kishore is a liar, a badmash; how can any of you believe his talk?'

'But I know it is the truth, sahib. I have proof.'

'Proof? Balls! Where is it?'

'I will show it; I will show it when time comes.'

Henry was annoyed. 'And when is that time going to come?' he asked.

'Very soon.'

It was a mistake to speak kindly to Indian servants. He shouldn't have said 'thank you' to Pasupati, of course, nor engaged him in conversation. It was hard to see how their minds worked.

'Now go and report to Miranda Miss sahib,' he snapped. 'And come back here with my dinner. Miranda Miss sahib is having dinner with me. And bring a ghara of water: you lazy lout, why do you think the Club pays you forty rupees a month if you don't even take the trouble to keep the filter filled?'

'Jee, sahib.'

'And don't go talking bloody nonsense about my big rifle not firing; otherwise . . . otherwise I'll have you sacked from here, ekdum; maloom?'

'Jee sahib.'

'Maybe to-morrow I give you baksheesh - big baksheesh.'

And at the mention of baksheesh Pasupati's sullen scowl had broken into a mirthless grimace once more, transforming his black, tight-skinned face with its prominent chalk-white teeth and slitty, Mongoloid eyes into an inhuman, almost evil mask, like the snarl of a wild animal.

He sent Pasupati away just before sundown because he wanted to be alone for the magic moment when the sun went down in the jungle. He duly toasted the setting sun and lay back, alone and intensely happy.

Soon it was pitch dark. He switched on the artificial moon. The light blinked on and off for several seconds before it came on. It was more like a searchlight than the diffused glow of the imitation moon. Something was clearly wrong with the ground glass pane or the cowl. They would have to have the whole thing taken down, thought Henry, you didn't need a hunter to tell you what was wrong with it. For a moment, Henry found himself wondering why Sudden should have asked him to inspect the light when it was so obviously a job for an electrician. He switched off the light and lay down on the bench in the smothering darkness, thinking of Ruby Miranda and counting the minutes to her arrival. After a while he stopped looking at the luminous dial of his watch making up his mind not to look again until after she had come.

The seconds drugged on interminably, but he did not seem to mind, he was now at the end of his quest. He abandoned himself to the black, silent night.

What woke him up was the sound of a faint crash somewhere below. He rose with a start and switched on the moon, but could not see anything that might have accounted for the noise. It could only be a dried branch falling, somewhere beyond the glow of the light, he decided, and switched off the moon. He helped himself to a generous drink and lay down again.

He became aware of the faint pink glow in the sky exactly at the same instant that he heard the swish swish of the pulley rope jerking viciously in the open window, and his heart gave a sudden leap. Ruby Miranda she had come at last. He looked at his watch, it was three minutes to nine. He went shuffling through the passage between the bedroom and the bathroom, his heavy walking-stick tapping sharply on the wooden floor of the cottage. When he reached the window he looked down and gave a low whistle. There was no answering whistle, but there was a slight tug on the rope.

He began to pull up the basket, all of a sudden feeling hungry and thinking of the cold chicken and the champagne. The basket felt surprisingly light.

By the time he came back into the observation verandah, the basket in his hand, the glow in the sky had become deeper, and then with a startling, unbelieving suddenness his nostrils caught the first suspicion of the smell of smoke. He turned and looked. He dropped the basket on the floor and ran back to the window, stumbling awkwardly because he had left his stick behind. Leaning out of the window, he called out, 'Send the boy up, quick, Ruby! I must get down. The forest is on fire. Send Pasupati up to help me!'

There was no answer from below; only the faint stirring of leaves.

'Pasupati! PASUPATI!' yelled Henry. 'Come up, Juldi!' But even as he was calling he realized that neither Pasupati nor Ruby was there; that he was alone.

Henry came back into the verandah, switched on the artificial moon and took out his torch from his haversack. His heart was pounding like a hammer, but he was confident of being able to go down by himself if he didn't panic. I must keep cool, not panic, he told himself as he began to climb down the steps of the staircase leading to the cleft of the tree. The staircase was the most dangerous part, with his leg in the state it was; the ladders would be relatively easy. One by one, cautiously and yet with speed, he began to go down the steps, counting them carefully. One ... two ... three ... He knew there were eight steps down to the platform. After that there would be the long, fifteen-foot teakwood ladder connected with the rope ladder farther down. Once he was on the ladder, he knew he would be fairly safe, for he could let himself down rung by rung, his arms supporting most of his weight.

He climbed down the eight steps, reached the small platform in the cleft of the tree, and carefully lowered his left foot to feel for the rung of the ladder. A cold fear went running through him as his foot groped uncertainly, lower and lower, hovering over space, realizing with a shock that the ladder was not there; realizing and yet refusing to believe.

It was then that Henry knew fear, fear such as he had never known before; a tangible, icy presence not within himself but outside, which he could feel rising like a gigantic dark wave as high as the sky, and coming on and on inexorably, smothering him and

rolling him over and over as though he were some minute insect. He drew up his foot as though it had touched a snake. He sat down on the platform and flashed his torch into the space below.

It only confirmed what he already knew, that the teakwood ladder from the fork of the tree to the rope ladder below was not there.

So that must have been the crash he had heard earlier in the evening.

And then as though someone had pulled out a fuse from the electric box in the golf club innex, the artificial moon went out. But by that time, it did not matter, its sickly yellow light had been overpowered by the red glow of the fire raging all round him and casting weird shadows in the forest.

The smell of paraffin now became stronger than ever. Groggily, Henry clunked the eight steps back into the verandah, and raced madly for the main window. He leaned out and tugged viciously at the thin khaki and green pulley rope, his brain desperately trying to work out how exactly he could utilize the rope to lower himself down. But what came into his hand was merely a charred and smouldering section which could not have been more than fifteen feet long. He flung away the bit of rope with an angry oath and came back into the verandah almost stumbling over the wicker basket he had pulled up.

He peered into the basket seeking some kind of explanation of what was happening to him. In the spreading glow of the fire, he could see that the basket was empty except for two bright glow worms resting at the bottom. He thrust his hand into the shadows and came upon a bullet-gir-shaped object, and he knew without looking at it that it was one of the shells of his four-sixty-five rifle. Without looking too, he knew that the cartridge would have a dent in its cup. His fingers felt for the dent, it was there.

So Cockburn's man had found the missing cartridge. He had not given it to Cockburn. He must have given it to Pasupati, or was it to Jugal Kishore? The swine, the bloody black swine!

Henry looked inside the basket again, at the two innocent glow worms flickering blue and red in the half-darkness, and suddenly, recognizing them for what they were, thrust his hand in once again.

They were not glow-worms, they were the sapphire and gold ear-

clips which he had bought in Calcutta for Ruby Miranda, and which he had seen her wearing that morning.

And that, as far as Henry Winton was concerned, was the moment of truth; bringing with it a fleeting spasm of realization, steadying his mind and restoring cold reason as though for a quick summing up, centring his thoughts on essentials.

So this was, what Ruby Miranda's blushing acquiescence, and Pasupati's mirthless good humour, had meant. And then he found himself sinking into doubt once again, wondering if Sudden too had had a hand in this; Sudden who had sent him to inspect the game cottage moon when he must have known that it was a job for an electrician; Sudden who had so studiously avoided looking him in the eye throughout their interview that morning.

The smell of paraffin was strong in his nostrils, and the flames were leaping all about him.

GLOSSARY

Achhi-baat, all right

Ajra, python.

Amas or **amawasya**, new moon day.
literally, the night of total
darkness

Baboo or **Babu**, clerk or white collar
worker, educated man, also **Mis-**
ter, i.e., **Sen bibu** means **Mr Sen**
Badmash, 'badmarsh' as pronounced
by most Englishmen) rogue

Bachha young one

Bahut meherbani, thank you very
much

Baksheesh, reward

Bandobast, arrangements

Bandook, gun, rifle

Bazzar, market

Bhil, a jungle tribe

Bibies, women

Bilaya' England

Brahmin, high caste Hindu

Burra khana, big meal or feast

Burra laat, big Lord

Burra sahib, big master

Chale jao, go away

Chandni Chowk, famous square in
the heart of Delhi

Chaprassy, office boy.

Charpoy, string bed

Chips, slang for rupees

Choli, short blouse

Chota-peg, small peg

Chowkidar, gate man

Churidar, cotton **Judhpore** breeches.

Coolie, Indian labourer

Daal, pulses, usually curried

Dandy, chair carried on poles

Desi khana, Indian meal.

Deodar, a variety of pine

Dewan i **Khas**, audience hall in the
Red fort at Delhi

Do two

Doldol, a kind of sweetmeat

DSO, British decoration for gall-
antry in action

Fkd in at once

Ghara, vessel or pitcher

Ghurral, Himalayan wolf

Ghussal, bitl.

Gond a jungle tribe

Idhar ao, come here

Izzat, prestige

doo spell, magic

Jaggery, unrefined sugar

Jawans, soldiers, literally young
men

Jee, yes, also polite suffix

Jaldi, quick

Khabbar information

Khaddar, hand spun and hand
woven cloth

Khana, meal

Khatum, finished.

Khud, valle

Koi hai, anyone there?

Kukri, curved Gurkha knife

Kumbia, a kind of tree

Kutchra, flimsy, half-baked.
Lakh, one hundred thousand.
Lao, bring.

Maharaj, king, also great one.
Makna, tuskless male elephant.
Mali, gardener.
Marwari, trader, usually from Marwar.
Massala, spices.
M.B.E., British decoration: Member of the British Empire.
Mazdoor-Saugh, labour union.
Memsahib, lady.
Mofussil, upcountry, away from chief towns.
Mohwa, a kind of tree.

Paan, leaf, usually betel leaf.
Pallao, rich spiced rice cooked with meat.
Paltan, army.
Pani, water.
Papars, thin salty snacks, usually fried.
Peepul, a kind of tree considered by the Hindus as holy.
Pooja, prayer.
Pucca, strong, permanent, thorough.
Pucca-sahib, thorough gentleman.
Puries, fried wheat-cakes.

Ragi, a kind of coarse millet.

Saablogs, gentlemen.
Sadhu, holy man.
Sahib, master, also term of respect, such as Mister.
Sal, kind of tree.

Salaam, greeting.
Sambhar, large Indian deer.
Sankranti, Hindu festival, usually 14th January.
Santhal, a tribe in Assam.
Sari, garment worn by Indian women.
Seer, Indian weight, equivalent to two lbs.
Sepoy, soldier.
Shabash, well done
Sharap, wine.
Shikar, hunt.
Shikari, hunting guide, often a professional.
Shrimati, respectable woman.
Sub-cheeze, the whole lot.
Subahdar, military rank, approximating to Sergeant Major.

Taiyar, ready.
Tamasha, show.
Thana, station.
Theek-hai, all right.
Thero, wait, stop.
Thunda, cold.
Tiffin, midday meal.
Tonga, horse-drawn carriage.
Toon, a kind of tree.

Ulloo-ka-bachha, son of a fool, literally son of an owl.

Vedic, according to the Vedas, the Hindu scriptures.
Vindaloo, spicy meat curry.

Zidd, feud.

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